

COUNTERTERRORISM UNDER THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

A Fractured Response
to a Diversified Threat

Matthew Levitt, *Editor*



Counterterrorism Under the Trump Administration: A Fractured Response to a Diversified Threat

COUNTERTERRORISM LECTURES 2018–20

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Editor



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Cover photo: Women honor the victims of a mass shooting in Gilroy, California, July 2019. Reuters/Kate Munsch

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Acknowledgments

Thirteen years ago, I kicked off The Washington Institute’s Counterterrorism Lecture Series, an endeavor that continues to draw the brightest minds and most expert practitioners to discuss the terrorist threats facing the United States and its allies, and the best means of countering them. The success of this series stems from the caliber of the participants and the hard work of a great many people at the Institute.

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It is a blessing to be part of the intellectual community that is The Washington Institute. The lectures that follow allow the reader a taste of the debates and discussions that occur regularly in the offices and hallways of the Institute—and in 2020 on video calls.

Dr. Matthew Levitt
December 2020

Speakers

Note that positions listed were those held at the time of the respective lectures.

■ MATTHEW ALCOKE

Matthew Alcoke is the special agent in charge of the Counterterrorism Division of the FBI's Washington Field Office. He previously served as deputy assistant director of the FBI's Counterterrorism Division, leading its intelligence branch. Before that, Alcoke held roles as section chief at the FBI's Office of Partner Engagement, supervisor of a Chicago Safe Streets and Gang Task Force, assistant section chief in the FBI Counterterrorism Division's operational analysis branch of the Foreign Terrorist Tracking Task Force and International Terrorism Operations Section II, and assistant special agent in charge of the Criminal Branch in Atlanta.

■ AMARNATH AMARASINGAM

Amarnath Amarasingam is an assistant professor in the School of Religion at Queens University, Ontario, a senior research fellow at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, and an associate fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation.

■ JOHN FERNANDEZ

John Fernandez is the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration's assistant special agent in charge of the Special Operations Division's Counter-Narcoterrorism Operations Center, overseeing interagency support to field investigations concerning Hezbollah's global criminal support network. Previously, he worked for two years as a staff coordinator for the center. He has also worked for the DEA's San Jose, Madrid, and Los Angeles offices, and as an intelligence analyst with the CIA's Africa and Latin America divisions.

■ EDMUND FITTON-BROWN

Edmund Fitton-Brown is a former British diplomat and coordinator of the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Concerning the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and the Taliban. The team tracks and reports on implementation of Chapter VII sanctions against UN-designated groups and affiliated individuals in support of the 1267 Committee and, within the UN, is responsible for assessing the global threat from these groups. Previously, Fitton-Brown served as British ambassador to Yemen and regional counselor for the Arabian Peninsula, among other postings in Riyadh, Cairo, Kuwait, and other locales.

■ MATTHEW LEVITT

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. He is a former deputy assistant secretary for intelligence and analysis at the U.S. Department of the Treasury and counterterrorism intelligence analyst at the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Levitt teaches at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and is the author of *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* (2013).

■ DEVORAH MARGOLIN

Devorah Margolin is a senior research fellow at the George Washington University's Program on Extremism, where she manages the ISIS Files Project. She is also a PhD candidate in the Department of War Studies at King's College London.

■ ELIZABETH NEUMANN

Elizabeth Neumann served as the assistant secretary for threat prevention and security policy at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, responsible for developing and coordinating policy on issues such as countering transnational criminal organizations, hostile nation-states, human traffickers, and terrorists; using biometrics, identity management, screening, and vetting to prevent terrorist travel; and sharing information with international partners. She also oversaw the Visa Waiver Program, REAL ID, the Counter-

ing Unmanned Aerial Systems Program Office, and the Office for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention. Previously, she worked with the White House Homeland Security Council and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

■ FARAH PANDITH

Farah Pandith, the State Department's first-ever U.S. representative to Muslim communities and a veteran of Republican and Democratic administrations, is the author of *How We Win: How Cutting-Edge Entrepreneurs, Political Visionaries, Enlightened Business Leaders, and Social Media Mavens Can Defeat the Extremist Threat* (HarperCollins, 2019).

■ NATHAN SALES

Nathan Sales is the ambassador-at-large and coordinator for counterterrorism at the State Department. A tenured law professor, he previously served as deputy assistant secretary for policy at the Department of Homeland Security, where he led efforts to strengthen and expand the Visa Waiver Program. He also worked on counterterrorism policy in the Justice Department's Office of Legal Policy.

■ RUSSELL TRAVERS

Russell Travers is a U.S. national security official who served as acting director of the National Counterterrorism Center from August 2019 to March 2020. He has also held other leadership positions within the NCTC, including deputy director, senior counselor to the director, acting director of the Office of Data Strategy and Innovation, and chief data officer for both the NCTC and ODNI. He previously served in positions at the National Security Council, National Intelligence Council, Defense Intelligence Agency, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and U.S. Army.

■ JACOB WALLEES

Jacob Walles retired from the U.S. foreign service in March 2017 after a distinguished thirty-five-year career, including time as ambassador to Tunisia and senior advisor on foreign fighters in the State Department's Counterterrorism Bureau. After leaving government, he joined the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace as a nonresident senior fellow.

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Juan Zarate served as deputy assistant to the president and deputy national security advisor for combating terrorism in the George W. Bush administration. He is currently the chairman and cofounder of the Financial Integrity Network, chairman of the Center on Economic and Financial Power, and a senior national security analyst for NBC News.

■ AARON ZELIN

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at The Washington Institute and a visiting research scholar at Brandeis University. He is the author of *Your Sons Are at Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad* (Columbia University Press, 2020). Zelin is also the founder of the widely acclaimed and cited website Jihadology.net and its podcast, *JihadPod*.

Introduction: In Search of a Strategy to Contend with a Diversified International Terrorist Threat

■ Matthew Levitt

The Trump administration's record on counterterrorism is mixed. To its credit, the administration picked up where Obama's left off, leading an international coalition that ultimately produced the battlefield defeat of the Islamic State's so-called caliphate and the killing of IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi just a few months later. Persistent pressure on Huras al-Din and other al-Qaeda-affiliated elements in Syria's Idlib province, and ongoing campaigns targeting the far-flung provinces and affiliates of both IS and al-Qaeda, kept those groups largely at bay. Furthermore, efforts to address Iran's state sponsorship of terrorism, including the activities of Tehran's growing stable of proxies such as Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Kataib Hezbollah, yielded positive results. On the flip side, the president's "Muslim ban" and a discomfiting unwillingness to unconditionally condemn white supremacist groups significantly cut against the administration's own stated goal of working with communities to prevent terrorism. Meanwhile, inconsistency marred U.S. efforts to work "by, with, and through" allies in Syria, and counterterrorism budget cuts undermined moves to effectively address an increasing terrorist threat in Africa. One key reason for these misaligned policy goals was the administration's haphazard interagency decisionmaking process, which led to the production of three critically important but largely unaligned national strategy documents, addressing U.S. national security strategy overall, defense strategy, and counterterrorism strategy.

Midway through the Trump administration, in November 2018, The Washington Institute began its latest lineup of Counterterrorism Lectures, continuing a series

that dates to December 2007. At this opening event, the U.S. State Department counterterrorism coordinator, Ambassador Nathan Sales, assessed Iran's sponsorship of terrorism and unveiled a string of sanctions targeting operatives affiliated with the Qods Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Hezbollah, and other Iranian proxy groups. Contending with Iran and its terrorist proxies has been a thematic constant of the Trump administration, and deservedly so given Tehran's nearly \$1 billion annual budget to support terrorism.¹ Yet while the lectures opened on a preferred topic for the administration, they quickly turned toward less favorable and even uncomfortable terrain.

Just days before this lecture round began, the United States suffered two domestic terrorist attacks, with the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting by a white supremacist anti-Semite in late October 2018 and the Tallahassee yoga studio shooting by a gunman identifying with the involuntary celibate ("incel") community in early November 2018. Ultimately, the lectures would include a discussion of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's strategic framework to counter terrorism and targeted violence, including threats from racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists (REMVE). But the rise of domestic terrorist threats unrelated to jihadist extremism—especially from white supremacists and right-wing extremist movements—proved to be a contentious issue within the Trump administration, even as the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Homeland Security Department, and NGOs such as the Anti-Defamation League underscored the immediate threat posed by domestic terrorism in America.² Moreover, the United States would emerge over this two-year period as a hotspot of right-wing extremism and an exporter of ideologies inspiring perpetrators of mass violence attacks in places abroad from Germany to New Zealand.³ The increasingly transnational nature of what has traditionally been seen as a domestic threat added a new component to this phenomenon. U.S. law enforcement now refers to violent extremism by people who act without direction or inspiration from a foreign terrorist group or another foreign power as domestic violent extremism (DVE). But even these domestic—often lone—offenders increasingly exhibit transnational characteristics.⁴

Beyond the DVE threat, the nature of homegrown violent extremism more broadly has shifted in dangerous ways. U.S. law enforcement describes a homegrown violent extremist as a U.S.-based individual, of whatever citizenship, who "advocates, is engaged in, or is preparing to engage in ideologically-motivated terrorist activities (including providing support to terrorism) in furtherance of political or social objectives promoted by a foreign terrorist organization (FTO), but is acting independently of direction by an FTO."⁵ Speakers in this lecture series

highlighted the diversification of ideological justifications homegrown violent extremists exhibited for resorting to terrorism and political violence. Today, law enforcement officials report that they no longer see homegrown violent extremists as simply drawn to a particular ideology and then, over time, mobilized to violence based on those ideas. Instead, they report a worrying ideological fluidity among homegrown violent extremists, who bounce from one ideology to another, sometimes mixing disparate ideologies together, searching for ideas that justify a preexisting inclination to act violently.

While the FBI and Homeland Security Department see the gravest terrorist threats to the United States coming from domestic and homegrown violent extremists, they stress that organized terrorist groups such as IS and al-Qaeda remain dangerous. Despite President Trump's insistence that IS has been defeated,⁶ counterterrorism officials are concerned that both this jihadist group and al-Qaeda have shown resilience against severe counterterrorism operations, adopting a more decentralized structure and operational model.⁷ At one level, this is a measure of operational success—al-Qaeda and affiliated groups were once centralized and able to carry out spectacular, even catastrophic, attacks like those on September 11—but after nearly two decades, they are forced to operate more diffusely. There may be more terrorists today than there were on 9/11, but counterterrorism officials point out they are less organized and less capable of conducting mass-casualty attacks. Yet they still pose significant threats to the United States and its allies. One particular threat emanates from returning foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs)—IS members and operatives from displaced persons and detention camps in Syria, e.g., al-Hawl—who could inspire and direct attacks abroad, and carry out terrorist and insurgent operations in Syria, Iraq, and around the world.

One reason such groups remain dangerous is their continued access to funding. While IS lost significant income streams by virtue of its territorial defeat, the group still draws on millions of dollars in financial reserves, according to the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Concerning the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and the Taliban.⁸ Responding to increasingly effective global efforts to counter the financing of terrorism, terrorist groups now rely on more creative, and often local, means of raising funds. The U.S. Treasury Department designated Hezbollah-affiliated companies in West Africa, for example, that were involved in fishing, rental cars, food processing, and pig farming.⁹ Groups like Hezbollah, which enjoy state sponsorship, leaned on such ties for financial benefits as well. While the U.S. "maximum pressure" policy undermined some level of Iranian funding for its proxy groups, Tehran continued to pump nearly a billion dollars a

year into its proxies' coffers, according to the State Department.¹⁰ Terrorist groups have complemented their traditional revenue streams with proceeds from criminal activities, such as Hezbollah's narcotics trafficking and money laundering. In some cases, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) reports, Iranian embassies and diplomatic pouches were used to transport narcotics.¹¹

Many developments played out in the world of terrorism and counterterrorism during Trump's term in office. Among the most significant was the earlier-noted rise of transnational white supremacist and far-right extremism as part of a domestic violent extremist threat, the persistent homegrown violent extremist threat, and the challenges these two developments posed more broadly for countering violent extremism. Meanwhile, the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, and other elements of the so-called Iran Threat Network continued to present an increasingly diversified set of international terrorist threats. At the same time, given the Islamic State's territorial defeat and the significant increase in counterterrorism capabilities over the past three decades, counterterrorism appropriately dropped from the very top of the national security list to one of several priorities, with the resultant dip in funding and a general instruction from policymakers to do more with less. Together, these themes shaped the Trump administration's approach to counterterrorism, which, due to a lack of alignment among various national security strategies, seemed to lack an overarching framework for coordinating and harmonizing efforts across departments and agencies.

THE RISE OF TRANSNATIONAL WHITE SUPREMACIST AND FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM

Across the board, U.S. counterterrorism agencies—from the FBI and the Homeland Security Department to the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC)—unanimously identify right-wing and white supremacist terrorism as the most pressing threat from among the larger REMVE basket. While President Trump called for the terrorist designation of Antifa, the far-left antifascist movement,¹² counterterrorism officials see the U.S. domestic terrorist threat emanating from far-right groups with white supremacist, neo-Nazi, anti-immigrant, and other racist ties. In the words of FBI special agent in charge Matthew Alcoke, who heads the Counterterrorism Division of the Washington Field Office and previously served as deputy assistant director (DAD) of the bureau's Counterterrorism Division: "A majority of our domestic terrorism cases fall into one of four

categories: racially motivated violent extremism, antigovernment/anti-authority extremism, animal rights/environmental extremism, and abortion extremism.”¹³

Extremism that falls within the broad REMVE basket is often unstructured, lacking clearly defined ideological guideposts or organizational schemes. Dominated by lone actors and small cells of like-minded followers, this class of extremism thrives in the borderless safe haven of the virtual world but with real-world consequences. Further, the lack of a federal-level domestic terrorism statute such as that for international terrorism severely complicates efforts by U.S. national security agencies to counter this rising threat.

Following a deadly span of domestic terrorist attacks, the Homeland Security Department developed its *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence*, which was released in September 2019. The strategy is the first of its kind to recognize that today’s evolving threat landscape “is no longer dominated solely by the challenges that foreign terrorist organizations pose.”¹⁴ The framework highlights domestic terrorism and the need for the department to “amplify its focus on the growing domestic challenge.”¹⁵ Similarly, in April 2019 the FBI established a “Domestic Terrorism–Hate Crimes Fusion Cell” in recognition of the intersection of these overlapping forms of political violence and the extremist ideologies driving them.¹⁶

Another facet of REMVE terrorism now recognized by authorities is its transnational nature. Members of white supremacist and other such movements have traveled overseas to fight in conflicts and attend training camps. They communicate with one another across borders and oceans, inspire one another and share manifestos, and send funds to support one another.¹⁷ Acting NCTC director Russell Travers underscored the increasingly global nature of this threat, noting that “a large percentage of REMVE attackers in recent years have either displayed outreach to like-minded individuals or groups or referenced early attackers as sources of inspiration.”¹⁸ European services note this trend as well. Consider the Finnish security service’s annual national security report, which remarked that “international ‘far-right’ online groups and communication over social media platforms reinforce the transnational character of the ‘extreme right.’”¹⁹

What is more, the United States is increasingly seen as a kind of safe haven for far-right extremism. In much the same way Washington and others pressed Riyadh to take tangible action to curb the global spread of jihadist ideology after 9/11, the international community today is pressing America to address the growth of far-right extremism here and its export abroad. And just as Western countries expressed little sympathy when the kingdom asked for patience as it slowly addressed an issue that presented uncomfortable religious, social, and legal

challenges, the international community today is impatient when Washington points to religious, social, and legal hurdles in curbing domestic terrorist activities and extremist ideologies. “For almost two decades,” Travers lamented, “the United States has pointed abroad at countries who are exporters of extreme Islamist ideology. We are now being seen as the exporters of white supremacist ideology.”²⁰ To address this embarrassing and dispiriting reality, Washington needs to develop tools tailored to address the domestic terrorist threat in line with constitutional protections. A domestic parallel to the foreign terrorist designation and the related material-support statute may prove a bridge too far, but the country is long past due for tough conversations about where to draw the line on domestic terrorism, right-wing extremism, and their spillover effect beyond U.S. borders.

Meanwhile, in April 2020 the State Department designated the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO)—the first time such a designation was applied to a transnational right-wing extremist organization. RIM’s activities clearly qualified it for the FTO designation, such as training operatives from other countries who went on to carry out attacks in their home countries. “RIM is a terrorist group that provides paramilitary-style training to neo-Nazis and white supremacists, and it plays a prominent role in trying to rally like-minded Europeans and Americans into a common front against their perceived enemies,” the State Department explained at the time of the designation.²¹

A PERSISTENT HOMEGROWN VIOLENT EXTREMIST THREAT

For years before and after 9/11, the primary threat to the United States came from organized foreign terrorist groups. But today, Matthew Alcoke explained, “the greatest threat we face in the homeland emanates from self-radicalized lone actors, of any ideology, who look to attack soft targets with easily accessible weapons.”²² This lone offender phenomenon cuts across the ideological spectrum, and includes homegrown violent extremists (HVEs) who are either inspired by or, in a few cases, directed by a foreign terrorist organization. Foreign-directed plots, such as the May 2015 shooting attack in Garland, Texas,²³ include direct contact of some kind with a member of a foreign terrorist organization who instructs or otherwise helps the operatives in conducting the operation on the ground. Homeland Security assistant secretary Elizabeth Neumann explained how “virtual plotters” tied to the Islamic State’s external operations unit can act as force multipliers helping to improve the operational skills of local attackers.²⁴

But the vast majority of jihadist plots in the United States are inspired plots carried out by homegrown violent extremists. FBI director Christopher Wray has underscored the significance of communications technology fueling this shift from in-person networks to self-starting operatives, noting that “terrorism moves at the speed of social media.”²⁵

The HVE threat presents several interwoven challenges for law enforcement and intelligence agencies. Lone offender and small group attacks can be carried out very quickly, with minimal funding and preparation. As a result, authorities may be denied both the lag time within which to run an effective investigation and the benefit of key tripwires—e.g., the ability to follow travel, communications, and financials trails—that in the past proved to be especially productive lines of investigative inquiry. Reflecting on FBI investigations, DAD Alcoke cited studies that found that successful attackers typically mobilized to violence in under half a year. This injects an element of unpredictability regarding potential terrorism suspects “and demonstrates the ‘flash to bang’ mobilization lifespan, or case velocity,” as the FBI refers to it. The bottom line is that law enforcement agencies are not likely to have much time in which to act to prevent an attack.

Another challenge is the increasingly young age of many HVE attackers. “In 2018,” Alcoke noted, “juveniles comprised nearly one-third of all identified homeland attackers and plotters inspired by foreign terrorist organizations like ISIS and al-Qa’ida.”²⁶ For the FBI, this points to the danger that teenagers searching for a sense of belonging, identity, or adherence to a larger cause could be especially susceptible to violent ideologies that address these yearnings. Because identifying potential HVE plotters is so difficult, the FBI, NCTC, and Homeland Security Department together developed the *Homegrown Violent Extremist Mobilization Indicators* handbook, which focuses on observable conduct instead of any type of profiling.²⁷ Such conduct is apt to be observed online or by family, friends, or others in the community; private-sector entities might also spot behaviors they should report. Consider the case of Mustafa Mousab Alowemer, a twenty-one-year-old Pittsburgh resident originally from Syria arrested by the FBI in June 2019 for allegedly planning to bomb a church, in an IS-inspired plot. According to the FBI, Alowemer engaged in observable indicator behaviors, such as distributing terrorist propaganda and recording a video pledging allegiance to the Islamic State.²⁸

President Trump stated in August 2020 that “we obliterated 100 percent of the ISIS caliphate and killed its founder and leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.”²⁹ But his own Homeland Security Department would report in its October 2020 *Homeland Threat Assessment* that “despite territorial defeats in Iraq and Syria, ISIS

continues to draw support from HVEs in the United States and the group's global calls for attacks have intensified since the death last year of senior leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi."³⁰

COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Under the Trump administration, preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) continued to be an area of focus, although it was largely reframed as "terrorism prevention." The administration's October 2018 *National Strategy for Counterterrorism* cited countering terrorist radicalization and recruitment as one of six strategic objectives that, in turn, included priority actions such as "institutionalize a prevention architecture to thwart terrorism," "combat violent extremist ideologies," "increase civil society's role in terrorism prevention," and "support intervention, reintegration, and counter-recidivism efforts," among others.³¹ U.S. support for CVE programs abroad continued apace, but issues like a "Muslim ban" and praise for domestic violent extremists distressed many civil society CVE groups, which shied away from collaborating with the Trump-era federal government.³² Some of these relationships improved over time, especially after the September 2019 release by the Homeland Security Department of its *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence*, which targets the full spectrum of actors and ideologies promoting terrorism and political violence.³³

Addressing the full range of violent extremism is important, not only because of the gamut of ideologies promoting violent extremism but also because law enforcement agencies are increasingly seeing ideological fluidity in younger attackers, who experiment with different ideas and belief systems toward best justifying their preexisting interest in committing acts of violence. FBI DAD Alcoke explained the phenomenon this way: "In recent years, we have also seen individuals, particularly juveniles, mix multiple extremist ideologies to develop unique personalized justifications for violence. Often elements of these ideologies are opposed to each other. In short, ideologically fluid extremists may be drawn more to violence than to the ideology itself."³⁴ Juan Zarate, former deputy national security advisor in the George W. Bush administration, concurred, noting that "the ecosystem of extremism is not bound by traditional ideological lines, explaining why far-right extremism merits attention as part of this ecosystem."³⁵

Based on her extensive global travels as the U.S. government's first Special Representative to Muslim Communities, Farah Pandith noted that Muslim

millennials she encountered typically grappled with questions of identity, belonging, and purpose. “Yet the U.S. government had trouble identifying this connection because it tends to compartmentalize its focus by region,” she explained. “Ideological war, however, does not limit itself to a specific region or country.” This is especially true since the search for identity and purpose seems to drive most people to seek out belonging in ideological groups, with ideology itself serving as the binding agent within these typically close-knit communities. Part of the answer, Pandith stressed, is partnering with the private sector and NGOs, which are more agile in this space than government agencies. But, she added, “Congress needs to understand that the soft-power war has not received money equivalent to the hard-power war, and that this balance needs to be rectified in order to stop terrorist recruitment.”³⁶

Another area where public-private sector cooperation could make a tangible difference is in cyberspace and social media communication. The development of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) is a smart move in the right direction, especially now that it has become an independent nonprofit and is not an appendage of big tech companies. Launched by said tech companies in August 2017, at the height of the Islamic State’s social media reach, the GIFCT is now directed by Nicholas J. Rasmussen, a longtime U.S. government counterterrorism official and the former NCTC director.³⁷ Working together, academics, technology professionals, and government officials stand a better chance of addressing the herculean task of making cyberspace less hospitable for terrorists. Denying terrorists a safe haven and constricting their operating environment in the real world has long been a cornerstone of counterterrorism strategy, and now requires equally committed efforts in the virtual world. As the Homeland Security Department made clear in its 2020 threat assessment, “FTOs seek to inspire violent extremism in the United States and continue to use social media and other online platforms to call for attacks against the United States.”³⁸ Terrorist groups recruit, raise funds, procure weapons, and propagandize in the real and virtual worlds, and the counterterrorism response must take place on both battlefields.

Perhaps the most politicized aspect of counterterrorism policy under the Trump administration has been border security. To the extent the president’s “Muslim ban” was rooted in national security issues at all, it was based on the faulty assumption that U.S. border security was weak and that the violent extremist threats facing the United States came from beyond its borders. So, in the wake of the October 2017 vehicular terrorist attack in Manhattan, President Trump quickly tweeted: “We must not allow ISIS to return, or enter, our country after

defeating them in the Middle East and elsewhere. Enough!”³⁹ The problem is that the kind of terrorist assault New York had just suffered has nothing to do with border security. The question is not the origins of people who later resort to terrorist acts but when and where they were radicalized. According to a March 2017 Homeland Security Department report, “most foreign-born, U.S.-based violent extremists likely radicalized several years after their entry to the United States.”⁴⁰ Another Homeland Security report concluded that “citizenship is unlikely to be a reliable indicator of potential terrorist activity.”⁴¹ The most pressing terrorism threat facing American communities today is local, not foreign. The solutions must be local too.

Moreover, by pursuing a policy that targeted people of a particular faith, and from specific countries, the Trump administration undermined its own stated goal of “increasing civil society’s role in terrorism prevention.” Having alienated entire communities and civil society sectors, the administration was ill-prepared to use “engagement, public communications, and diplomacy” to “strengthen and connect our partners in civil society who are eager to expand their limited terrorism prevention efforts.”⁴² This presented challenges in addressing not only the growing threat from white supremacist and other domestic terrorist elements, but also the ongoing threats posed by al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and their fellow travelers.

THE ISLAMIC STATE AND AL-QAEDA AS SUBSTATE ACTORS

In early March 2019, coalition forces liberated the Islamic State’s last stronghold in Baghuz, Syria, marking the territorial defeat of the so-called caliphate. Even before this decisive battle, however, President Trump had declared the Islamic State defeated and, back in December 2018, spontaneously announced on Twitter his intention to begin withdrawing U.S. forces from Syria.⁴³ The president’s assessment broke with that of his top national security advisors, and led to the resignations of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and the special presidential envoy to the coalition fighting the Islamic State, Brett McGurk.⁴⁴

In fact, while the Islamic State’s territorial defeat was a watershed in the international effort to counter the group as a military force, the event did not presage its complete collapse as a terrorist and insurgent threat. The group drove that point home just weeks later with the April 2019 Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka, which left over 250 dead and over 500 injured. Citing this tragic attack, the State Department counterterrorism coordinator, Ambassador Nathan Sales, took

a somewhat different take on the IS threat from the president, noting that “this is not the end of the fight. ISIS is down, but it’s not out. We need to prevent it from reconstituting itself as a fighting force in Iraq and Syria, and we need to keep it from leveraging its international networks to recover from this crushing defeat. Because ISIS is evolving in order to stay alive.”⁴⁵

As early as January 2018, the UN secretary-general reported that the Islamic State was already “organized as a global network, with a flat hierarchy and less operational control over its affiliates.”⁴⁶ In practice, this meant that the group was relying more on individuals and small groups to conduct attacks, using social media and encrypted communication platforms to connect with its followers and regional affiliates. By the time President Trump first announced his intention to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria in December 2018, the group had already re-established its insurgent capacities, increasing violence levels in Iraq’s Kirkuk, Nineveh, and Diyala provinces.⁴⁷ The group quickly reverted to the playbook its predecessor had followed during the 2007 U.S. troop “surge” and tribal awakening (*sahwa*) in Iraq, killing local leaders and town elders to undermine the likelihood that areas the group once controlled could be stabilized and rebuilt.⁴⁸ And, as the UN’s Edmund Fitton-Brown reported, the group moved to quickly establish covert networks in Syria at the provincial level, paralleling those in Iraq, where “it is adapting, consolidating, creating conditions for its eventual resurgence.”⁴⁹

Islamic State provinces, meanwhile, continued to draw the attention of counterterrorism officials. “Even after suffering significant defeats,” FBI DAD Alcock stressed, “ISIS can now rely on global support from its branches.”⁵⁰ Some speculate that the leadership transition following Baghdadi’s death “might accelerate the delegation of authority from ISIL-core to its affiliates,” while in Africa the Islamic State has already devolved authority such that more prominent affiliates take leadership roles over smaller ones.⁵¹

Meanwhile, despite a stated U.S. counterterrorism strategic objective of getting “foreign partners to take a greater role in preventing and countering terrorism,”⁵² the president’s sudden withdrawal decision on Syria undermined U.S. partners fighting the Islamic State on the ground. Within hours of the announcement, reports emerged that the U.S.-allied, Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces were considering releasing up to 3,200 IS prisoners they were holding, most of whom were foreign fighters.⁵³ This mass release would present immediate terrorism risks since, as the Trump administration’s own National Security Strategy observes, “many of these jihadist terrorists [in Iraq and Syria] are likely to return to their home countries, from which they can continue to plot and launch attacks on the United States and our allies.”⁵⁴

The Islamic State's evolution—from a proto-state controlling territory and enjoying massive income streams from natural resources and public extortion, to a group engaged in underground insurgency in Syria and Iraq and terrorism globally—presented the international community with new threat sets requiring different responses. The new foreign fighter threat includes the problem of repatriating and trying fighters and their families captured in Syria and Iraq and held in internally displaced persons camps and detention camps. The associated challenges came into stark relief in February 2019, when Trump implicitly threatened European countries as he pressed them to repatriate and try their citizens at home. “The alternative,” he added, “is not a good one in that we will be forced to release them.” European security services were acutely aware of the consequences presented by this alternative, and the president only stoked those worries by tweeting, “The U.S. does not want to watch as these...fighters permeate Europe, which is where they are expected to go...Time for others to step up.”⁵⁵ Addressing the untenable status quo regarding IS detainees remains a critical issue, as Aaron Zelin, Devorah Margolin, and Amarnath Amarasingam convincingly explain in their lectures for this series.

One area of success in the struggle against the Islamic State came in countering the group's finances. This was largely a by-product of defeating its so-called caliphate and denying the group access to the resources it previously enjoyed from exploiting natural resources and extorting the local population. The bad news is that the group maintained significant financial reserves, estimated at \$100–\$300 million, according to information member states provided to the UN.⁵⁶ In Iraq and neighboring countries, the UN reported in July 2018, the group continued to finance itself through investments and by infiltrating existing businesses, such as construction companies, money exchanges, agricultural entities, fisheries, and real estate, including hotels.⁵⁷ Moreover, while its income sources fell, IS no longer required anywhere near the money it once did, since it no longer bore the huge administrative costs of running a territory as large as Great Britain.

Despite the president's on-again, off-again approach to a U.S. military draw-down from Syria, the United States and the counter-Islamic State coalition continued to rack up successes. A prominent example was the October 2019 killing of Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was discovered not in Iraq or in one of the few remaining IS strongholds in Syria, but rather in Idlib province, where his jihadist nemeses Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the al-Qaeda-affiliated Huras al-Din (HAD) are headquartered.⁵⁸ That fact underscored the continuing, and perhaps expanding, threat posed by al-Qaeda alongside IS.

During the span of these lectures, al-Qaeda's only successful international

terrorist operation, since the January 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* and kosher market attacks in Paris, was the December 2019 shooting at the Pensacola Naval Air Station, which was claimed by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (as were the Paris attacks).⁵⁹ Even after the Pensacola tragedy, al-Qaeda received a fraction of the attention paid to IS, but the group warrants continued scrutiny. The NCTC's Russell Travers warned that "it too retains a command structure and half dozen affiliates, and we see growing connections and coordination between and among its affiliates."⁶⁰

Meanwhile, al-Qaeda-affiliated groups around Idlib effectively carved out the largest safe haven the group has even known. According to UN figures, by early 2020 HTS was fielding 12,000–15,000 fighters in Syria, while HAD controlled 3,500–5,000 fighters.⁶¹ These personnel were primarily fighting the Syrian regime, enabling the Islamic State to take a back seat in that effort. Despite leadership setbacks—Hamza bin Laden was killed, and Ayman al-Zawahiri was reported to be ill—younger leaders, especially those tied to HAD, still appear set on conducting acts of international terrorism. At the moment, Edmund Fitton-Brown assessed, al-Qaeda prioritizes covering the administrative costs of running a de facto emirate in Idlib province over devising international plots.⁶² And while HAD aspires to carry out attacks abroad, persistent counterterrorism pressure has curtailed the group's ability to act on its ambitions. Yet, as the Homeland Security Department has warned, "the group continues to wage insurgencies, recruit from local populations, and target Western interests in the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, and beyond."⁶³

EXPANDING IRAN THREAT NETWORK

From growing a network of proxy militias in Iraq and Syria, to promoting militant groups undermining security in the Gulf countries, to building up Hezbollah's precision-guided missile arsenal and supporting the group's terrorist activities abroad, Iran has proactively engaged in state sponsorship of terrorism at an unprecedented scale. And as the May 2019 conviction in a New York court of Hezbollah operative Ali Kourani made clear, this includes potential plotting targeting the U.S. homeland.⁶⁴

During one of Kourani's meetings with the FBI, an agent recalled in court, Kourani "sat back in his chair, squared his shoulders [to the interviewing agents] and stated, 'I am a member of 910, also known as Islamic Jihad or the Black Ops of Hezbollah. The unit is Iranian-controlled.'"⁶⁵ Within Hezbollah, Unit 910

reports directly to Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, according to Kourani, but Iran oversees its operations. At the behest of his Hezbollah handler, Kourani carried out surveillance of FBI and U.S. Secret Service offices in New York City, as well as a U.S. Army armory there. He was also tasked with identifying Israelis in New York who could be targeted by Hezbollah and with finding potential arms-procurement sources to help create stockpiles in the New York area, among other assignments.⁶⁶

As part of its threat assessment, the Homeland Security Department determined that “Iran will continue to develop and maintain terrorist capabilities as an option to deter the United States from taking what Tehran considers regime threatening actions or to retaliate for such activity, real or perceived.” Iran and its proxy Hezbollah, the assessment continued, “have demonstrated the intent to conduct an array of operations in the Homeland. Iran or LH [Lebanese Hezbollah] could advance an attack plot—with little to no warning—in response to heightened tensions. The U.S. Government in recent years has arrested several individuals acting on behalf of the Government of Iran or LH who have conducted surveillance indicative of contingency planning for lethal attacks in the U.S.”⁶⁷

In June 2018, reflecting the reach of Iranian capabilities abroad, a Dutch investigation led to the expulsion of two Iranian diplomats based at the country’s embassy in Amsterdam.⁶⁸ This followed the assassination several months earlier in the Dutch capital of an Iranian Arab activist.⁶⁹ In March of the same year, Albanian authorities arrested two Iranian operatives on terrorism charges after they were caught surveilling a location where Iranian new year (Nowruz) celebrations were about to begin.⁷⁰ Also in early 2018, after weeks of surveillance, German authorities raided several homes tied to Iranian operatives who reportedly were collecting information on possible Israeli and Jewish targets in the country, including the Israeli embassy and a Jewish kindergarten. Arrest warrants were issued for ten Iranian agents, but none of these individuals were apprehended.⁷¹ And just a month before that, the German government issued an official protest to the Iranian ambassador following the conviction of an Iranian agent for spying in Germany. In that case, the agent scouted targets in 2016, including the head of the German-Israeli Association.⁷²

As 2018 proceeded, in August, the FBI arrested two Iranian men accused of conducting U.S.-based surveillance of Jewish and Iranian dissident groups.⁷³ Iranian agents were caught carrying out similar operational activities in Europe as well. Following the July 2018 arrest of an Iranian diplomat in Germany for his role in an alleged plot to bomb rallying Iranian dissidents in Paris, U.S.

officials warned allies to be vigilant of Iranian terrorist plotting elsewhere too.⁷⁴ The Iranian diplomat, Assadollah Assadi, allegedly hired an Iranian couple living in Belgium to bomb the Paris rally and provided them with five hundred grams of TATP explosives at a meeting in Luxembourg. On detaining the couple in Belgium, authorities found powerful explosives and a detonation device in their car.⁷⁵

Law enforcement and intelligence officials worry that future terrorist operations by the “Iran Threat Network” might draw upon the deep bench of Shia militants across Iran’s proxy groups. Ample literature discusses Iran’s ability to deploy Shia militia fighters to other battlefields in the region,⁷⁶ but this new concern focuses on Iran’s deployment of select Shia operatives to carry out acts of international terrorism. In a Joint Intelligence Bulletin issued days after IRGC Qods Force chief Qasem Soleimani was killed in January 2020, the U.S. intelligence community warned that if Iran decided to carry out a retaliatory attack in the United States, it “could act directly or enlist the cooperation of proxies and partners, such as Lebanese Hezbollah.”⁷⁷ Security officials worry that the next “Hezbollah” attack in the West, or infiltration across Israel’s northern border, could be conducted by non-Iranian, non-Lebanese operatives within these proxy and partner groups from Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Gulf states, or elsewhere. As Secretary-General Nasrallah himself said in a speech following Soleimani’s death, “the rest of the Axis of Resistance must begin operations,” meaning the burden of exacting a price for the Soleimani targeted killing would not be borne by Hezbollah alone.⁷⁸

The assessment of Iran by State Department counterterrorism coordinator Nathan Sales as the world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism reflects an unvarnished truth. But Tehran’s sustained ability to fund its proxies at nearly \$1 billion a year suggests a disconnect between the means and ends of the Trump administration’s maximum pressure policy. The approach successfully denied Iran access to significant oil and other income, but this denial was intended as a means to prevent the Islamic Republic from financing its proxies, undermining regional stability, and pursuing a nuclear weapons program. Yet Iran increased its activity in each of these categories nevertheless. Maximum pressure succeeded therefore when measured by performance but fell short when measured by effectiveness.

In contrast to the larger maximum pressure policy targeting Iran, more targeted sanctions focused on Hezbollah in Lebanon generated significant financial pressure. As a result, Hezbollah sought to diversify its economic portfolio and more actively raise funds through criminal activities such as money laundering and narcotics trafficking. John Fernandez, the DEA’s Assistant Special Agent in

Charge, outlined the agency’s targeting of Hezbollah’s criminal support network worldwide, highlighting this network’s outside footprint in western Europe. In some cases, Fernandez noted, Hezbollah has even “competed for money laundering contracts in the same manner as Colombian cartels and other criminal organizations.”⁷⁹ Iran also wants access to this criminal enterprise, he added, pointing to DEA information indicating that “Iranian embassies [are] being used in furtherance of Hezbollah criminal enterprises. For example, diplomatic pouches have reportedly been used to transport narcotics at times.” Sometimes, he added, some of the illicit proceeds from Hezbollah’s criminal activities are passed on to Iran.⁸⁰

A FRACTURED RESPONSE TO A DIVERSIFIED THREAT

The timing of the lectures in this compendium, covering the second half of President Donald Trump’s tenure, casts light on how his administration dealt with a wide range of counterterrorism issues. It also coincides with a period over which terrorism was explicitly—and appropriately—downgraded from the top U.S. national security priority to number five (as discussed in more detail later).⁸¹ Despite a wide range of terrorist threats, policymakers are increasingly asking counterterrorism officials to do more with less as budgets shrink and priorities shift away from “forever wars” and the Middle East toward Great and Near Power competition and the Asia-Pacific region.

Over the past two decades, counterterrorism efforts have marked a rare instance of bipartisan convergence in U.S. politics. One dominant post-9/11 line of argument held that it is better to fight terrorists abroad than at home or, as former defense secretary Robert Gates put it, “better to fight them on their 10-yard line than on our 10-yard line.”⁸² But something of bipartisan consensus has also coalesced around the notion that the United States should reduce its military presence around the world and invert the longstanding model of a U.S.-led and partner-enabled global counterterrorism mission. Doing so, however, will require investing in much more meaningful public-private relationships to overcome deficiencies related to technology and data management, dealing with the proliferation of open-source data and (often encrypted) global communication, as well as taking other steps. As former acting NCTC director Russell Travers put it: “What does the risk equation look like in a country with such a complex national security environment? How should the government optimize allocation of counterterrorism resources in the country’s best interests when departments and

agencies have differing priorities? And how can America continue the successes of its CT posture without reversing the gains made since the 9/11 attacks?”

The confusing lack of alignment among various Trump-era national security strategies has made resolving such questions all the more urgent. In particular, there is a marked dissonance among the U.S. National Security Strategy, the U.S. National Defense Strategy, and the U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy. And since most intelligence community agencies fall under the purview of the Defense Department, an internal departmental decision to shift budgets away from counterterrorism and toward Great Power competition risks undermining the overall U.S. government counterterrorism mission.

Under the National Defense Strategy, a “4+1 framework” guides prioritization of resources to address the top five national security challenges: Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, and transnational violent extremism (i.e., counterterrorism).⁸³ Without a clear effort to align these various strategies, the broader national security strategy lacks the means to coherently optimize areas of overlap, such as the counterterrorism and Great Power competition missions in Africa. Despite being chronically understaffed, for example, U.S. Africa Command saw cuts of up to 10 percent of its continental forces to address security challenges elsewhere.⁸⁴

Other fallout from this lack of coordination: President Trump periodically announced that the Islamic State had been defeated when it had not been, a function not only of his personal style but of the absence of an effective interagency process.⁸⁵ Senior Trump administration officials would tout the maximum pressure policy’s success in denying Iran’s financing of its terrorist proxies, but concede that Tehran still provides them nearly \$1 billion a year. And cost-effective, small-footprint U.S. counterterrorism initiatives in Syria and Africa—partner-led, U.S.-enabled missions targeting areas of clear overlap between counterterrorism and Great Power competition—were trimmed to the point of undermining the U.S. defense strategy’s own goal of strengthening alliances and attracting new partners.⁸⁶

These lectures, spanning November 2018 to March 2020, offer a snapshot of the terrorist threat and the counterterrorism response during the second half of the Trump administration. To capitalize on the administration’s successes, and to mitigate the effects of its shortcomings, the incoming Biden administration will need to tighten the U.S. interagency policymaking process and better coordinate the nation’s interconnected national security strategies. Harmonizing stated goals—e.g., working with American communities to counter violent extremism or building partner-led, U.S.-enabled international coalitions to address threats abroad—with other policies to avoid contradiction will be critical. An honest

assessment of which Trump counterterrorism policies worked and which could be improved upon will be necessary to promote a safer, more resilient, and more compassionate U.S. security posture. This lecture series is an excellent place to start such a review.

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Washington DC, December 2020

NOTES

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Tehran's International Targets: Assessing Iranian Terror Sponsorship

Nathan Sales

Ambassador-at-Large and Coordinator for Counterterrorism at the State Department

RAPPORTEUR'S SUMMARY

Thanks for that warm introduction and for hosting me here. It's a real pleasure to participate in The Washington Institute's Counterterrorism Lecture Series. A number of my predecessors from the CT Bureau have had the privilege of speaking at this lectern, and I'm honored to be here to keep the streak alive.

Today, I'm going to highlight U.S. concerns about ongoing terrorism by the Iranian regime and its proxies around the world. Then I'll tell you what the Trump administration is doing to counter this global and growing threat.

Iran is the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism. Period. It has held that dubious distinction for many years now and shows no sign of relinquishing the title.

To the contrary, the regime in Tehran continues to provide hundreds of millions of dollars every year to terrorists across the world. It does this despite ongoing economic turmoil that's impoverishing many of its people. The beneficiaries of this misbegotten largesse range from Hezbollah in Lebanon, to Hamas in Gaza, to violent rejectionist groups in the West Bank, to the Houthis in Yemen, to hostile militias in Iraq and Syria.

Let me give you some numbers. This may sound hard to believe, but Iran provides Hezbollah alone some \$700 million a year. It gives another \$100 million

“Iran is the world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism. Period. It has held that dubious distinction for many years now and shows no sign of relinquishing the title.”

to various Palestinian terrorist groups. When you throw in the money provided to other terrorists, the total comes close to one billion dollars.

Let's pause to consider that, because it bears repeating: the Iranian regime spends nearly a billion dollars a year just to support terrorism. I'd be tempted to make a Dr. Evil reference if the stakes weren't so high.

And who ultimately pays the price of this support? The Iranian people. The resources Iran uses to fund its global terrorist campaign come directly out of the pockets of ordinary Iranians. The regime robs its own citizens to pay its proxies abroad.

Tehran's priorities are clear. It doesn't seek to boost economic growth at home or to improve Iranian living standards. It doesn't seek to reduce Iran's growing unemployment. What the regime prioritizes, despite the country's increasing economic distress, is buying guns and bombs for foreign terrorists.

Tragically, this vast waste of the Iranian people's assets has resulted in bloodshed and instability across the globe. Let me lay out what I mean.

In Syria, Tehran has given massive military and financial assistance to the Assad regime, ensuring its survival and, not coincidentally, giving Tehran access to other parts of the Levant.

Iran has built and backed new militia forces in Syria and Iraq. This cadre of battle-hardened fighters can serve as a loyal expeditionary force for the Iranian regime. We've seen firsthand in recent months how dangerous these proxies can be. Two months ago, Iranian-linked militias in Iraq launched rockets at our embassy in Baghdad and our consulate in Basra. Fortunately, no one was killed, but these attacks can leave no doubt about the regime's support for violence.

Iran is working constantly to undermine its neighbors in the Gulf. In Bahrain, Tehran has developed a close partnership with the Ashtar Brigades—an organization working to overthrow the Bahraini government. Iran provides al-Ashtar with training, funding, and weapons, enabling the group's terrorist attacks.

Farther afield, Iran sponsors terror through an elaborate network of allies, proxies, and cutouts. Tehran is the chief patron of Lebanese Hezbollah, one of the world's most capable and worrisome terrorist groups.

Thanks to Iran's backing, Hezbollah has built a fearsome arsenal. The group now has more than 100,000 rockets in Lebanon, a massive and destabilizing buildup. Indifferent to the people it purports to defend, Hezbollah hides its missile factories in population centers—effectively using innocent civilians as human shields.

And while Hezbollah likes to tout its political role and social services in Lebanon, that's an ill-fitting fig leaf for its true and more nefarious agenda. Let's be clear: Hezbollah is not an NGO; it is not just another political party. Hezbollah is a terrorist group with a bloody record of perpetrating violence and destruction

in Lebanon and Syria, throughout the Middle East, and around the world.

Hezbollah's ambitions and global reach rival those of al-Qaeda and ISIS. In recent years, Hezbollah operatives have been caught preparing attacks as far afield as Azerbaijan, Bolivia, Cyprus, Egypt, Peru, and Thailand. Hezbollah weapons caches have been discovered in the Gulf, in Europe, in Asia, and in Africa. In 2012, Hezbollah bombed a bus in Bulgaria, killing five Israeli tourists and one Bulgarian citizen.

Iran isn't content to merely fund proxies like Hezbollah. The regime itself engages in terrorist plotting around the world.

Just last month, an Iranian operative was arrested for planning assassinations in Denmark. This summer, authorities in Germany, Belgium, and France collaborated to thwart a plot to bomb a political rally near Paris. They arrested several Iranian operatives—including an Iranian spy operating under diplomatic cover in Austria. Ordinarily, the arrest of a purported diplomat for planning a terrorist attack would be unprecedented. For Iran, it's business as usual.

These plots were particularly brazen in their indifference to civilian casualties, in their abuse of diplomatic status, and in their general shamelessness. But they're just the tip of the iceberg. For Iran has a long and sordid history of backing terrorism in Europe.

In January, German authorities discovered and investigated ten suspected IRGC Qods Force operatives. In March, Albania arrested two Iranian operatives for terrorist plotting. Several years ago, Germany arrested and subsequently convicted a Qods Force operative who was surveilling the head of a German-Israeli group and his associates. In 2012, Turkish authorities disrupted a plot by four Qods Force operatives to attack Israeli targets in Turkey. Iran was responsible for not one but two separate plots in Cyprus, in 2012 and in 2015.

Iran is actively plotting terrorism in Europe, but it plots in lots of other places too. Africa, Southeast Asia, and South America have also seen Iran-backed terrorism in recent years.

In 2013, three Iranian operatives were arrested in Nigeria for planning attacks against U.S. and Israeli tourist sites and organizations. The previous year, two Qods Force operatives were arrested in Kenya for plotting attacks against Western interests—and some thirty-three pounds of explosives were found in their possession.

In South America, a senior Iranian diplomat—sound familiar?—was found to be planning an attack near the Israeli embassy in Uruguay. And in Asia, since 2011, Iranian operatives have been implicated in plots and attacks in Nepal, India, and Pakistan.

Our country is not immune. In 2011, the Qods Force allegedly was involved in a plan to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States at a restaurant in

Georgetown. And just this past August, the FBI arrested two people for allegedly surveilling Bahai and Jewish facilities in the United States. They're also suspected of collecting information about Americans who belong to an Iranian opposition group.

All in all, an extraordinary compendium of evil. This is not the behavior of a normal government. This is the behavior of a lawless regime that uses terrorism as a basic tool of statecraft.

We cannot let this threat go unanswered. And so the Trump administration is responding. We're going after Iranian support for terrorism in a variety of ways to get at the people and organizations Iran uses to spread terror.

Last week, the United States reimposed a range of sanctions on Iran that had been lifted with the signing of the flawed nuclear deal, as well as new sanctions on additional Iranian entities. Our actions included sanctions against Iran's energy and shipping sectors, as well as the Iranian Central Bank.

These new designations ramp up already intense pressure—pressure that's designed to force Iran to act like a normal country. I can assure you that until Iran changes its ways, more pressure is coming. And we will sustain that pressure until Iranian leaders cease their destructive behavior.

Our campaign has been building for some time: Last year, the administration took a major step to hold Iran accountable when the Treasury Department named the IRGC as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) for its support for terrorism.

The State Department likewise has been aggressively sanctioning Iranian-linked terrorists. In 2018, we designated al-Ashtar Brigades in Bahrain and several of its leaders. We also designated Harakat al-Sabirin, an Iran-backed group operating in Gaza.

This is just the beginning. We will continue to target Iran's terrorist proxies. They will pay a price for their actions and their partnership with the regime in Tehran.

At the same time, the administration is ramping up efforts against Hezbollah. We're using law enforcement and financial tools to disrupt its networks. We're targeting its financial resources and squeezing it out of the international financial system. The U.S. government has designated over 150 entities and individuals tied to that terrorist group, including more than 40 in 2018 alone.

I'll give you a few examples that illustrate the breadth of Hezbollah's networks. Earlier this year, Treasury sanctioned a number of Hezbollah front companies and facilitators in West Africa. These included fishing, car rentals, food processing—even pig farming. Yes, there's a Hezbollah pig farm in Liberia.

We're also using the Rewards for Justice (RFJ) program to add to the pressure on Hezbollah, offering multimillion-dollar rewards for information leading to

the identification or location of key leaders and operatives. Last year, the State Department issued RFJ reward offers for two Hezbollah leaders—Talal Hamiyah and Fuad Shukr. These men have American blood on their hands. These were the first RFJs targeting Hezbollah in more than a decade.

Thanks to good intelligence, solid investigative work, and some luck, Iranian terrorist plotting has not—so far—resulted in the hundreds of casualties that Tehran is clearly trying to orchestrate. But counting on luck is not a winning strategy.

We need to do more to change the Iranian regime's calculus and end its support for terrorism. And we know that the United States cannot do this alone, which is why we're pressing our international partners to stand up to Iran-backed terrorism.

We also need the private sector to play a responsible role in this effort. I'll be blunt: if you're doing business with Iran, you're funding terrorism. The IRGC has penetrated nearly every sector of the Iranian economy. By enriching the IRGC, companies are, even if inadvertently, enabling Tehran's terrorist agenda. This has to stop.

All of us can do more. All of us must do more. Therefore, today, I am announcing several significant new measures the Trump administration is taking to constrain Iran and its proxies.

To begin with—and this will not be a surprise—the State Department's mandatory five-year review of Hezbollah has once again determined that the group must and will remain on our list of designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations. This means all of Hezbollah. We reject the false distinction between Hezbollah's terrorist wing and a purportedly peaceful "political wing." Hezbollah is one organization. It is a terrorist organization, root and branch.

The State Department is also levying two new terrorism designations today. First, we're sanctioning Jawad Nasrallah as an SDGT. Jawad Nasrallah is a Hezbollah leader and the son of the group's secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah. In 2016, Jawad tried to activate a suicide bombing and shooting cell based in the West Bank. Fortunately, security forces arrested the five people he had recruited for this operation.

Second, we're designating the al-Mujahidin Brigades (AMB). Based in the Gaza Strip, the AMB is a military organization that has operated in the Palestinian Territories since 2005. Its members have long plotted attacks against Israeli

“Earlier this year, Treasury sanctioned a number of Hezbollah front companies and facilitators in West Africa. These included fishing, car rentals, food processing—even pig farming. Yes, there’s a Hezbollah pig farm in Liberia.”

targets. AMB has ties to Hezbollah, and Hezbollah has provided funding and military training to AMB members.

Along with these actions by the State Department, earlier today the Treasury Department announced four designations targeting Iranian and Hezbollah-linked terrorists in Iraq. First, Treasury is sanctioning Shebl al-Zaidi as an SDGT. Zaidi has served as a financial coordinator between the Qods Force and militias in Iraq. He has also facilitated Iraqi investments on behalf of Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Qods Force. Zaidi has helped smuggle oil for Iran and has sent Iraqi fighters to Syria allegedly at the request of the Qods Force.

In addition, Treasury is designating Yusuf Hashim. Hashim oversees all Hezbollah-related operations in Iraq and is in charge of protecting Hezbollah's interests in that country.

Treasury is also designating Muhammad Farhat. Farhat has advised militias in Iraq on behalf of Hezbollah. He was also tasked with collecting security and intelligence information in Iraq for senior Hezbollah and Iranian leadership.

Lastly, Treasury is designating Adnan Kawtharani. Kawtharani facilitates business transactions for Hezbollah inside Iraq and regularly meets there with militias and Hezbollah officials. He has also helped secure funding for Hezbollah, and has served as the right-hand man for his brother and senior Hezbollah member Muhammad Kawtharani—who himself was designated in 2013.

There's more to come. We'll be making some additional announcements at the State Department's press briefing later this afternoon. So stay tuned.

The goal of the measures I've described today is very simple: to force a change in the Iranian regime's behavior. We expect—we insist—that Iran follow the same rules every other country must follow and end its use of terrorism as a tool of statecraft.

We will make clear to Iran-backed terrorists and to their masters in Tehran that there are costs—increasingly heavy ones—to their support for terrorist barbarism. We are prepared to impose those costs on the regime and its proxies wherever they may be.

We know that this will be a long and difficult challenge. But we will prevail. We will continue to ratchet up the pressure until Iran comes to its senses, joins the community of civilized nations, and ends its support for murder and mayhem across the globe. We owe it to the victims, and we owe it to the cause of simple human decency. We can do no less.

Tunisia's Foreign Fighters

Aaron Zelin and Jacob Walles

RAPPORTEUR'S SUMMARY

AARON ZELIN

The heavy mobilization of Tunisians in the Iraqi and Syrian jihad stems from multiple domestic and foreign factors. Back at home, the Tunisian government sought dialogue over suppression for two years after the 2011 revolution, thus allowing jihadists to openly operate without much harassment. As the militant threat grew, however, the government began to crack down on Ansar al-Sharia (AST) in spring 2013, culminating in its designation as a terrorist group that August. The crackdown led to an outflow of fighters, coinciding with the Islamic State of Iraq expanding into Syria and becoming the group now known as the Islamic State (IS).

Yet some of the assumptions about Tunisian fighters have proven untrue. For one thing, fewer of them were involved in Iraq and Syria than is generally believed—around 27,000 tried to join, but only 2,900 actually made it to the conflict zone, less than half the typical estimate. Additionally, mobilization was a nationwide phenomenon in Tunisia, not specific to a particular city or region. And while some fighters joined al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra at first, most ended up joining IS once it openly announced its presence in Syria in April 2013.

Regarding the motivations of these fighters, three factors stand out. First, many Tunisians became disillusioned with post-revolution politics, especially well-educated youths, who experienced unemployment at extremely high rates. Despite the gradual political progress seen over the past seven years, economic rewards have yet to emerge, spurring some to radicalize. Second, reestablishing

the Caliphate was a strong motivator to join the jihad. When IS announced that it had done just that, many in the jihadist movement saw the news as an opportunity for Muslims to be on top again. Third, to atone for perceived past sins, some individuals with criminal pasts joined jihadist groups to redeem themselves.

Once they made it abroad, Tunisian fighters were involved in several kinds of activities. Perhaps most notoriously, two of them took part in the torture and execution of captured Jordanian pilot Lt. Muath al-Kasasbeh. Others engaged in outreach and religious education as part of the IS state-building project. One such individual was Abu Waqas al-Tunisi, who got involved early on and became the face of the IS dawa (proselytization) program, appearing in six of its videos by the end of 2013. For their part, Tunisian female fighters helped shape the vision of IS society, including through the group's infamous al-Khansa Brigade, led by a Tunisian woman named Umm Rayan.

In dealing with returning fighters, Tunis seems to hope that the problem will fix itself. The government offers no rehabilitation or reintegration initiatives for

“In dealing with returning fighters, Tunis seems to hope that the problem will fix itself. The government offers no rehabilitation or reintegration initiatives for individuals who fought in Syria—returnees are either detained in prison or free to join general society.”

individuals who fought in Syria—returnees are either detained in prison or free to join general society. Despite the risk of such an approach, Tunisia's democratic status provides an advantage: the government can rely on the country's robust civil society to help on such matters rather than conducting a purely security-based approach.

Whether this strategy can succeed remains to be seen. In the meantime, given the broad data on the country's jihadists, it is easy to see why officials in Tunis, Europe, and the United States remain worried about the movement's intentions.

JACOB WALLEES

For years, there was no good answer to the question “Why do so many foreign fighters hail from Tunisia?” Fortunately, Aaron's new study provides many of the details needed to fill that gap, highlighting Tunisia's unique situation as a country dealing with terrorism and radicalization in the middle of a democratic transition.

Two aspects of his study deserve particular attention. First, it addresses the

complex array of reasons driving the phenomenon. Second, it offers an accurate count of Tunisian fighters who actually made it to Syria and Iraq.

In the aftermath of the 2011 revolution, several major political developments set the stage for the emergence of foreign fighters from Tunisia. That same year, the government declared an amnesty for all political prisoners, a move that wound up freeing many dangerous jihadists. At the same time, the shakeup within the security forces following the ouster of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali diminished the state's capacity to deal with these jihadists, contributing to subsequent problems. And as mentioned previously, the troika government of 2012–13 initially tolerated jihadist activities. Taken together, these factors allowed radical groups to form, recruit new members, facilitate travel to Libya, Syria, and Iraq, and, eventually, organize attacks inside Tunisia.

The government's response comprised four phases. During the first phase (2011–September 2012), AST and other radical groups were generally permitted to organize in the open and send fighters to join what was then viewed as a popular struggle against Syria's Assad regime. In the second phase (2012–14), the government realized it had a problem, as radical groups began carrying out terrorist operations inside Tunisia—starting with the September 2012 attack on the U.S. embassy and followed by two high-profile political assassinations in 2013.

During the third phase (2014–15), the technocratic government led by Mehdi Jomaa began much closer cooperation with the United States and other foreign partners. A new counterterrorism law was passed in 2015, and the capacity of the security forces to confront terrorism improved. These domestic constraints prompted jihadists to shift their operations abroad, and the increased flow of foreign fighters to Libya, Syria, and Iraq during this period coincided with the rise of IS.

The fourth phase (2014–present) has seen the focus shift to returnees, with Tunisians publicly debating how to deal with them. The government realizes that a security-based approach is insufficient, but it has not made much headway toward a more holistic approach. Although the situation has greatly improved compared to 2012–13, and Tunisia has not suffered a major attack since November 2015, little has been done to address the underlying drivers of mobilization. The government is now able to recognize returnees at official border crossings, but it has no plan for what to do once they are identified and its security forces lack the means to monitor them. Meanwhile, the country's overcrowded prisons continue to serve as a breeding ground for jihadists. Tunisia receives assistance from the United States for prison management, but the problems of radicalization and security are closely intertwined with larger political and economic issues, making them particularly difficult to resolve.

The Battle Against Extremism: Assessment and Prescriptions

Farah Pandith, Juan Zarate, and Matthew Levitt

RAPPORTEUR'S SUMMARY

FARAH PANDITH

Since the September 11, 2001, attacks, fierce attention has been paid to what it means to be Muslim—and young Muslims have grown up seeing the word Islam constantly in the headlines. This attention can obviously have good and bad influences, but terrorist organizations that hope to recruit people as part of their armies have been tailoring their messages to exploit the resulting confusion young Muslims feel about their identity. Western and other officials understand this, too. They understood that, because of the Internet, what happened almost fifteen years ago during the cartoon crisis in Copenhagen also affected young people in Kabul. Through the help of embassies and special envoys to Muslim communities, the U.S. government could grasp the concerns and general mindset of people growing up after 9/11 in these communities. That demographic is the focus of my new book, *How We Win*.

“...a parent in Denmark asked, with tears in his eyes, how he could be raising his child in a place where he was surrounded by so few diverse Muslim voices.”

Identity and belonging were the central component, or data point, connecting the experience of young Muslims around the world in the post-9/11 era. The questions Muslim millennials asked in non-Muslim-majority countries like Spain or Italy were the same ones their peers were asking in Morocco or Malaysia. This was striking. Yet the U.S. government had trouble identifying this connection because it tends to compartmentalize its focus

by region. Ideological war, however, does not limit itself to a specific region or country.

For instance, a parent in Denmark asked, with tears in his eyes, how he could be raising his child in a place where he was surrounded by so few diverse Muslim voices. A group of Zanzibari students explained that the authentic African Islam infused with Arab elements particular to Zanzibar was changing due to foreign influences. American Muslims talked of feeling as if they did not belong in their own country. All these conversations reflected the emotional aspects of a markedly ideological war.

Government, however, doesn't do emotion well. For that reason, it cannot work alone. It can, however, partner with companies and NGOs to address the issues raised here. Today, NGOs are employing innovative and proven solutions, and they need government funds to reach appropriate scale. The most important role served by government should be that of convener, intellectual partner, and facilitator. The U.S. Congress needs to understand that the soft-power war has not received money equivalent to the hard-power war, and that this balance needs to be rectified in order to stop terrorist recruitment. Similarly, the private sector must be willing to work with the government. The kind of thinking and cultural listening that companies around the world already do can be channeled and used by the NGOs on the ground.

“During the Bush and Obama administrations, officials learned that the front end of countering violent extremism must come through locals and credible voices on the ground—primarily NGOs—because simply holding up the American flag and making a plea does not move a young person in a new direction.”

During the Bush and Obama administrations, officials learned that the front end of countering violent extremism must come through locals and credible voices on the ground—primarily NGOs—because simply holding up the American flag and making a plea does not move a young person in a new direction. But local NGOs are often desperately underfunded, which should not be the case. Both the government and private corporations should be giving these NGOs the funding they need to do the work they already know how to do.

The question often arises of how government should organize itself to combat the ideology of violent extremism. In truth, it doesn't matter what department dedicates itself to the issue, only that someone thinks about it every day—just as many individuals are daily dedicated to military and intelligence issues. More important still, the work must be collaborative and integrated, with everyone in every sector, whether private or public, contributing to the range of solutions.

JUAN ZARATE

Practitioners of countering violent extremist (CVE) are at a watershed for dealing with the question both domestically and within the international community. The moment requires deep reflection. Although the American public tends to look at issues in waves, paying attention to some while temporarily ignoring others, Farah's book demonstrates that violent extremism is an issue central to national security that requires continuous attention. It cannot be allowed to drift from the public eye.

During the early years of the Bush administration, practitioners faced a number of challenges. One, for example, was how to talk about the battle of ideas and capture the long-term dimensions of ideological struggle without alienating communities with which they needed to partner, especially Muslim communities around the world. CVE professionals resolved to think broadly in terms of extremist ecosystems where particular groups such as al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and far-right groups were active.

Farah's book highlights five lessons that are still important today. The first is that CVE is an issue of identity. That was a key revelation for many in the U.S. government: that the challenge wasn't simply a matter of one group or one terrorist manifestation, but about how communities viewed themselves and others. The second is that this struggle against extremism is generational, rather than episodic. It is driven by how millennials see themselves and the world around them. Third is that the ecosystem of extremism is not bound by traditional ideological lines, explaining why far-right extremism merits attention as part of this ecosystem. Fourth is that CVE cannot be viewed as merely an ancillary or interesting part of counterterrorism, because the inherent issues are much broader and deeper, underpinned by communities' self-perceptions. These issues require a different way of enlisting communities in combating them. The fifth lesson is the idea, deeply embedded in Farah's work, of empowering open societies to combat violent extremism. Here, the government serves not as the protagonist but as the enabler. Related is the need to find credible voices that can shape the environment proactively, along with relying on the technology community to lead the way in preventing violent extremism. This community must do so not just reactively by removing content, but proactively—by promoting networks that are trying to counter extremism.

MATTHEW LEVITT

Today's conversation about Farah's book is particularly timely. In the Trump administration's new counterterrorism strategy, its main theme—whether you call it countering violent extremism, counterradicalization, preventing violent extremism, or terrorism prevention—plays a prominent role, and the interagency is now sitting down to try to implement this focus.

This book gives voice to the search for cultural identity. While this may seem like an obvious issue to discuss—and one that has been written about many times before—Farah's book talks about it in a unique way that's invaluable to practitioners. The critical piece of the search for a cultural identity is a search for authenticity, and who presents authenticity. Because of Farah's positions in government, this book primarily focuses on these issues in the world's Muslim communities. But these conversations about identity and authenticity are just as applicable anywhere else, as people are looking for a cultural identity, feeling that their identity is being challenged, or just looking for something authentic.

For example, analysts have long pointed to the American melting pot and how well immigrants integrate into American society as one reason that radicalization to ideologically driven violence has not been as high here as, for example, in Europe. But youth in the United States experience the same issues tied to identity and the search for authenticity as others, especially in the information and social media age. That suggests that radicalization trends in the United States could move in a difficult direction, integration success notwithstanding.

To get ahead of the curve, U.S. officials must incorporate preexisting programs and pools of money from violence prevention, public safety, and public health efforts into those aimed at preventing violent extremism. They must focus on harnessing the resources of public health in particular, with its tiers of focus on global, community-level, and individual perspectives. And they need to support programs that engage with the individual—something the Islamic State and other adversaries have done more effectively by comparison—and not only try to solve problems on the community level.

Prevention is where the government gets the biggest bang for its buck. Because the Department of Justice has funded metrics and evaluations for programs to counter violent extremism, the excuse that these programs are not guaranteed to work is beginning to wear thin. Therefore, funding these programs is vital, as is learning from programs in Canada, Australia, and various European countries.

The Islamic State in Syria: What's Next?

Aaron Zelin, Devorah Margolin, and Amarnath Amarasingam

RAPPORTEUR'S SUMMARY

AARON ZELIN

On October 31, the Islamic State released a statement confirming the death of leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and announcing that its new “caliph” would be Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Quraishi, the presumed nom de guerre of former Baghdadi deputy Haji Abdullah. The coming days will likely see a proliferation of *bayat* (pledges of allegiance) from IS supporters, since such pledges are leader-specific rather than group-specific and thus need to be renewed with each succession. Also expected are video messages from IS *wilayat* (provinces) worldwide acknowledging the new caliph.

Past leader Abu Omar al-Baghdadi never appeared publicly, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi did not do so until 2014, four years after he became leader, so the

next caliph will probably avoid a major public presence. His appointment is also unlikely to spur an ideological confluence with competing jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda.

In operational terms, Baghdadi's death is unlikely to disrupt the group's daily activities. Its survival during the U.S. troop surge in Iraq and tribal “awakening” in 2007–9 is evidence of its ability to adapt. As early as 2016, former spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani noted that the loss of Mosul, Sirte, and Raqqa would not

“In operational terms, Baghdadi's death is unlikely to disrupt the group's daily activities. Its survival during the U.S. troop surge in Iraq and tribal ‘awakening’ in 2007–9 is evidence of its ability to adapt.”

constitute a true defeat; for IS, territorial defeat is just a test from God. Indeed, IS has claimed more than 600 attacks in Syria since the end of March.

Al-Hawl refugee camp in Syria is a particularly serious concern. Among its 68,000 inhabitants is a separate foreigners' annex with a section called "Jabal al-Baghuz," where the most extreme IS adherents function as a *hisba* force, or morality police. Yet not everyone in the camp is a jihadist sympathizer, and some inhabitants have been victims of IS abuses. One of the facility's most disconcerting aspects is its weak security architecture and the possibility of breakouts; IS members have already escaped a similar camp in Ain Issa. Just as the 2012–13 "Break the Wall" campaign in Iraq helped replenish the group's ranks, mass escapes from Syrian camps and prisons could help IS restart its multigenerational caliphate project.

Thus far, Western nations have abdicated responsibility for their citizens who remain housed in such facilities—an "out of sight, out of mind" policy that is unsustainable and will ultimately come back to haunt them. If the Assad regime gains control of the prisons, it will either execute the Westerners within or use them as bargaining chips. By repatriating these citizens, Western countries will gain greater intelligence and whittle down the group's potential ranks in theater. At the same time, the United States needs to work on rebuilding trust with the Syrian Defense Forces (SDF), its chief partner in fighting IS before the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the northeast.

DEVORAH MARGOLIN

The context of Baghdadi's death is important for two reasons. First, he was killed in Idlib, an area known to harbor other terrorist groups on whom he may have been relying for protection or other purposes. Yet any such cooperation would have been on a tactical level, not an ideological level. Second, he killed himself with a suicide vest, and his two wives were wearing similar vests when they were captured. This is notable because suicide is technically prohibited by Islam, except under one fatwa that explicitly applies to women.

When in power, Baghdadi had a potent trifecta of attributes: religious scholarship, familial lineage from the revered Qurayshi tribe, and tactical experience as a military commander. Yet the group's ideology will endure despite the transition to a new leader, and the fact that Qurayshi was selected by a shura council shows that its bureaucracy is intact as well.

Women will continue to play an important role for IS. The organization initially used propaganda to convince them to join the caliphate as wives, mothers, and educators, offering them the promise of being jihadist torchbearers and members

of a sisterhood. The loss of territory led to a shift in this messaging—since then, IS has allowed women to take up arms.

Although some women can be regarded as perpetrators of crimes under IS, all the children who witnessed and participated in acts of violence under duress should be treated as victims. If the refugee camps fall apart and their inhabitants flee, such children could be taken by IS or be targeted by the Assad regime and other factions who consider them IS members. For this reason, the international community needs to disaggregate women and children into two groups, further identify the radicalized women on a case-by-case basis, and repatriate all foreign fighters.

Indeed, the detainees in Syria pose a humanitarian, moral, and security dilemma. The international community needs to ensure fair trials, rehabilitation, and reintegration for prisoners. It should not allow suspected IS members to be convicted under Iraq's so-called ten-minute trials. Western countries have robust judicial and penal systems and are highly capable of managing this situation. The likelihood of an international tribunal in Iraq is highly doubtful as well, in part because Russia has explicitly objected to the idea.

As for the Islamic State's operational future, officials should not underestimate the group's ability to bounce back. They should also consider the possibility that IS affiliates will push back against the central leadership, as al-Qaeda in Iraq did against its parent organization years ago.

AMARNATH AMARASINGAM

Al-Hawl camp is unique in its composition. Compared to the more typical camp at al-Roj, which holds 1,700 people and is largely made up of non-radicalized refugees from Mosul, al-Hawl is overcrowded with individuals from more than sixty countries, including many IS adherents. Those residents who were already there when the camp was repurposed in 2016 are considered apostates by the IS members, who have issued threats and committed acts of violence against them. These extremists are also inculcating their children with hatred for the SDF personnel guarding the camp.

Children have been uniquely affected by IS in four main ways. First, they are incurring an educational deficit as a result of parents keeping them home from IS schools in the days of the caliphate. Second, many of them have suffered the loss of a parent and/or sibling. Third, many are traumatized by general exposure to violence, including executions, artillery shelling, drone strikes, and beheadings. Fourth, they are now contending with the refugee experience, including food

insecurity, anxiety, depression, survivor's guilt, loss of culture, dislocation, and the need to learn a new language.

As for the presence of foreigners at al-Hawl, researchers who visited the camp recently were told that American detainees were unavailable for interviews. The United States has supposedly shepherded its citizens out of al-Hawl to smaller camps, though their whereabouts remain unreported. In any case, Washington and its allies should begin preparing for repatriation and reintegration of prisoners, remaining clear-eyed about the difficulty of prosecuting fighters under current statutes. The formation of an international tribunal in Iraq is unlikely because it would need to receive unanimous support in the UN Security Council. Member states would also need to agree on issues such as who would be tried. Given these difficulties, countries should repatriate their citizens under a systematic protocol. It is also critical that U.S. forces continue their raids on IS sleeper cells.

“Washington and its allies should begin preparing for repatriation and reintegration of prisoners, remaining clear-eyed about the difficulty of prosecuting fighters under current statutes.”

Counterterrorism in an Era of Competing Priorities: Ten Key Considerations

Russell Travers

Acting Director of the National Counterterrorism Center

What a pleasure to be here amongst so many old friends to share some thoughts on counterterrorism in an era of competing priorities.

We are almost two decades removed from 9/11, and fortunately, we have been successful in preventing major attacks against the homeland. This success raises the important question of how counterterrorism should stack up against competing priorities, an increasingly relevant issue.

Ever since former secretary [Jim] Mattis issued the National Defense Strategy last year, there's been an ongoing conversation, at least implicitly, about risk. How does the threat of terrorism stack up relative to threats posed by great powers? Or North Korea? Or Iran? Or cyber?

I happened to have testified before Congress twice in the last two weeks, along with FBI and DHS leadership, to talk about threats to the homeland. Along with our discussion of terrorism, FBI and DHS leadership laid out a dizzying array of other threats to the homeland—election security, counterintelligence, intellectual property theft, and transnational organized crime—the last of which kills far more Americans than terrorism ever has or ever will.

As I said at the two hearings, it is completely understandable that terrorism may no longer be viewed as the number one threat to the country. But what does that mean? I posed three questions for consideration:

- What does the national risk equation look like as the country confronts a very complex international security environment?
- How do we optimize our CT resources in the best interests of the country

when departments and agencies may have somewhat differing priorities?

- And if we're going to reduce efforts against terrorism, how do we do so in a manner that doesn't inadvertently reverse gains of the past eighteen years?

For the next thirty-five minutes or so, I'd like to walk you through a bit of roadmap for the issues that I think need to be considered as we attempt to address those three questions. To do so, I'll be developing ten themes, going from the geostrategic level to the electron level and back up again.

THEME 1: GOOD NEWS

Let me say at the outset that terrorism is not and never has been an existential threat to the country and will not be unless it changes who we are as a people. That said, it does hold out the potential for killing a lot of people and as history has shown, it can occupy the country's attention for a very long time, preventing other important things from getting done.

Fortunately, we've made a lot of progress on the terrorism front. For example:

- The last significant al Qaeda-directed attack in the West was the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris five years ago. The last centrally directed ISIS attack in the West was at a Turkish nightclub three years ago and, before that, Paris and Brussels.
- Homeland violent extremist (HVE) attacks are down, with only one in the U.S. this year and roughly half dozen in Europe. Both down substantially from previous years.
- While capabilities ebb and flow, we've seen ISIS struggle to sustain success, such as we've seen in Libya.

"...terrorism is not and never has been an existential threat to the country and will not be unless it changes who we are as a people. ...it does hold out the potential for killing a lot of people and... can occupy the country's attention for a very long time."

These successes have not been by accident. For example:

- There have been tremendous military and intelligence efforts in Iraq and Syria to eliminate the so-called Caliphate. As a result, many skilled operatives have been captured or killed, impacting terrorism resources, causing less sophisticated terrorist messaging, increasing terrorist infighting, and

decreasing morale. These leadership removals have not been isolated to Iraq and Syria but have taken place around the globe.

- The U.S. government has pushed U.S. borders further out, through screening processes and other efforts, to make the homeland less hospitable for terrorists.
- We've also seen global efforts to improve border security, particularly in the EU after the Paris and Brussels attacks.
- We've seen a growing partnership with the private sector to make cyberspace less hospitable.
- And services around the globe are working together against terrorism unlike against any other national security threat.
- The U.S. government passes lessons learned to interested foreign partners with a robust exercise program to address information sharing and inter-agency cooperation.
- We are seeing capacity building in other countries, improvements in interservice cooperation, and enhancements in information sharing that can mitigate the impact of terrorist attacks. For example, compare the Kenyan response to al-Shabaab attacks against the Westgate Mall in 2013 and Dusit hotel earlier this year. Kenya dealt with the latest attack faster and with fewer casualties than the prior attack.

We will never eliminate terrorism, but a tremendous amount of good work has been done, which facilitates a conversation about comparative risk.

THEME 2: A CONCERN FOR COMPLACENCY

Though we have had many successes, we need to be careful. When I started working counterterrorism after 9/11, we were overwhelmingly focused on al Qaeda and a centrally directed threat emanating from one piece of real estate along the Afghanistan/Pakistan border. Eighteen years later, we see a diverse, diffuse threat that spans the globe. For example:

- The primary Islamist threat in many of our countries is from homegrown violent extremists.
- Despite the elimination of the so-called Caliphate, we have an active ISIS insurgency in Iraq and Syria and a sufficient command structure such

that it maintains cohesion over twenty-odd ISIS branches and networks around the globe; some very small and others with thousands of people. As of today, nine groups have pledged allegiance to the new ISIS leader.

- We have al Qaeda, which has received rather less attention over the past few years than ISIS, but it too retains a command structure and half dozen affiliates, and we see growing connections and coordination between and among its affiliates.
- There remains a full range of Shia-related threats, including Hezbollah and the Iranian Quds force as well as a growing concern for the Shia militant groups in Iraq.
- And if the various strands of Islamist extremism weren't complicated enough, we are also seeing a growing global threat of particularly extreme right-wing-related terrorism, which I will discuss further in a moment.

Terrorists around the globe are proving very capable at exploiting technology. They're good at it. And they're innovative. We see this in:

- The use of encrypted communications for operational planning.
- The use of social media to spread propaganda and transfer knowledge between and amongst individuals and networks.
- The use of drones for swarm attacks, explosive delivery means, and even assassination attempts.
- The use of high-quality fraudulent travel documents that undermine a names-based screening and vetting system and threaten border security.
- The use of crypto currencies to fund operations.
- And the potential terrorist use of chemical and biological weapons, which has moved from a low probability eventuality to something that is considered much more likely.

In many cases terrorist exploitation of technology has outpaced the associated legal and policy framework needed to deal with the threat. Looking out five years, we are particularly concerned with the growing adverse impact encryption will have on our counterterrorism efforts. We can't freeze our thinking in 2019, but we must always be looking to the future.

Finally, both al Qaeda and ISIS have shown themselves to be very successful at radicalizing vulnerable populations around the globe. We've seen these groups deploy emissaries to establish or organize a group or deploy an emissary to support an existing group if an emissary isn't already present with historic

ties or personal connections. We've also seen groups deploy an emissary to ISIS core. We see radicalization done remotely via social media, letters, or other very innovative ways that terrorists use to bolster their ranks.

THEME 3: NEED FOR FOCUS ON PREVENTION

“The U.S. government is really good at going after terrorist leadership. As demonstrated a couple weeks ago, we can eventually find anyone on the planet.”

The U.S. government is really good at going after terrorist leadership. As demonstrated a couple weeks ago, we can eventually find anyone on the planet. But ISIS and al Qaeda are movements as well as organizations, and we can't capture and kill our way out of an ideology.

By any objective standard, there are far more radicalized people now than there were on 9/11. Think tanks have suggested that we're looking at four times the number of radicalized individuals. And our own database of Known or Suspected Terrorists has grown by almost a factor of twenty. So unless you believe the fervor will simply burn itself out, we will be faced with a growing radicalization problem around the globe.

No single factor captures the complexity of the radicalization process among disaffected Sunni youth worldwide. We believe a mix of personal, group, community, sociopolitical, and ideological factors contribute to radicalization, recruitment to extremist Sunni organizations, and mobilization to violence.

We are gradually accumulating more empirical data. For instance, the United Nations Development Programme Regional Bureau for Africa evaluated 718 active or former African extremists—mostly from al-Shabaab or Boko Haram—to identify the reasons individuals were radicalized and recruited into extremist organizations. At the person level, the most important factor cited was human rights violations by the government security forces, but poverty, the nature of religious education, stable families, and government corruption were also cited.

But it's not just about poverty and being downtrodden. As we saw in Sri Lanka, the individuals were well educated and relatively well off, but radicalized by hate preachers. There is a great deal of fertile ground in countries, and we are facing growing radicalization in prisons and even amongst young children who are being targeted by extremist propaganda. There are various initiatives associated with messaging, deradicalization, defection programs, reintegration and off-ramping around the globe—as well as broader programs focused on good

governance, economic development, and human rights. Available resources remain a significant global problem.

If the numbers of radicalized people around the globe keep growing, I don't like our odds of identifying the right people to capture or kill or to keep out of the country. And there are second and third order effects. As the situation gets worse in Africa and climate change takes its toll, we are seeing greater forced migration. And the movement of migrants to Europe, in turn, is exacerbating tensions—giving further rise to right-wing violence to protest this migration. It is a vicious cycle.

THEME 4: NEED TO FOCUS ON IDENTITIES— PEOPLE OF CONCERN

Terrorist threats revolve around people and networks. And while tracking identities is pretty arcane, and not as interesting as talking about the future of ISIS or the latest strike, it is incredibly important. Our terrorist identities work underpins much of U.S. government screening and vetting architecture that evaluates 3.2 million people a day.

This is where we failed the country on 9/11. Two of the hijackers were allowed to get visas, live in the country, and eventually get on airplanes because we were insufficiently stitched together. An enormous amount of effort has been expended over the past eighteen years on this challenge. For example, we have effectively pushed borders out, creating a multilayered defense to identify individuals with terrorist connections at the earliest point. And we have continually improved: building richer dossiers, making better use of technology, performing near real time classified screening to support unclassified watch lists, and where possible, making use of biometrics.

This will never be a risk-free proposition, but the system has, overall, performed extraordinarily well. The NCTC, working with our partners, is responsible for compiling the U.S. government database of KSTs—known or suspected terrorists—and our data is used to support our screening partners. There has been some confusion on this point, and when we talk about KSTs, precision is very important. Each day, approximately three individuals who meet the definition of KSTs seek entry or permission to come to the country; this is not saying that they intend to conduct an attack—simply that there is sufficient derogatory information that warrants scrutiny. Upward of another seven watch-listed individuals per day may have connections to KSTs, but we lack individual derogatory information required to consider them known or suspected terrorists.

As you might imagine, when three million people per day are screened, drawing conclusions about any one particular individual can be fraught with challenges, but over the course of sixteen years, the system has stood the test of time. In some cases, refugees for instance, extra levels of scrutiny are provided. We have no indication that foreign terrorist groups have attempted to exploit the refugee admissions program, and robust screening and vetting probably limit their ability to do so. Over the past decade, there are only two individuals who arrived as refugees and went on to conduct attacks in the homeland; both radicalized after traveling to the U.S. The track record is pretty good.

However, as effective as we are at this, we can't sit on our laurels. And there are some warning signs.

As we saw in the Paris and Brussels attacks, many of the individuals were known to security services but had high quality fake passports or identification cards. Biographically based lists are on the wrong side of history. And we've already seen this in Northern Syria, where captured foreign fighters routinely gave fake names. Hence, the FBI and DoD focus on biometrically enrolling people.

We've also got ever-increasing amounts of information. How do we process all the volume of data and ensure high-quality databases? I will go more into this later.

In my opinion, we should be treating this period much like we did after 9/11. What are we trying to accomplish, and how are we going to get there? We have a lot of pieces and parts, and we need to ensure that they are stitched together.

The five- to ten-year vision should be a near real time biographic and biometric screening against all available U.S. government information to determine if an individual is a KST. This would involve greater focus on collection, integration, and sharing of biometrics, as well as business process and IT architectural improvements. The benefits would extend well beyond counterterrorism and support screening against other categories of threats.

THEME 5: NEED FOR ROBUST INTELLIGENCE

None of this happens unless we maintain a robust, integrated intelligence capability. There is no question that the CT enterprise is the best integrated part of the intelligence community—we've been doing it as a community for a very long time. But as good as we are, and as well-resourced, there will be significant challenges going forward.

A globally dispersed and diffuse terrorism threat that involves individuals and networks places great pressure on our intelligence services. We need to evaluate

the terrorist threat at multiple levels and have sufficient insight to determine if and when they pose a growing threat.

The first level is typified by the Sri Lanka problem. This was simply not a high priority before last Easter. The most hardline Islamist group, Sri Lanka Thahweeth Jamath (SLTJ), had denounced ISIS in 2016. That spawned a much smaller entity, National Thahweeth Jamath (NTJ), that was apparently responsible. NTJ had been a bit of a fringe element primarily known for attacks on Buddhist statues and not obviously associated with ISIS, so we didn't recognize the threat.

We are seeing local, indigenous Islamic insurgencies around the globe seek to affiliate themselves with ISIS. And with that comes greater interest in attacking Western interests. Consider the longstanding insurgency in northern Mozambique, which is now affiliated with ISIS and focused on U.S. energy interests. Extrapolate that to the twenty current and budding ISIS affiliates around the world and you get some sense of the intelligence challenge.

Moreover, we need to have sufficient insight into these indigenous insurgencies to assess if or when they may be expanding beyond a local and regional threat to one that may threaten the homeland. This has been a challenge in the past:

- In 2009, we thought of AQAP as a regional threat, but on Christmas Day 2009 Umar Farooq Abdulmutallab attempted to blow up NW [Northwest Airlines] Flight 253 over Detroit with an underwear bomb.
- And in 2010, we viewed the Pakistani Taliban as a regionally based South Asia threat. And yet they trained Faisal Shahzad, who went on to attempt a bombing in NYC Times Square.

Think about the broad array of people and networks and their ability to exploit technology. We have more than a few challenges:

- At the macro level, as we adjust priorities to other threats, there is no question that intelligence resources—collection and analytic—will be shifted away from terrorism to other threat priorities. Actions have consequences. What do we stop focusing on? What is the associated risk?
- As we draw down military forces, we will have less human intelligence, intelligence surveillance, and reconnaissance capability in theater. There will be less liaison with on-the-ground partners. These are simply facts. With those facts comes a degree of risk, and we'll need to determine how great that risk is and whether it can be compensated for.
- And, then, at the national level we need to ensure that we have the right constellation of organizations and authorities. This is a large enterprise. There is duplication of effort. There will need to be rationalization going forward to ensure we are using resources wisely.

THEME 6: NEED TO GET THE ELECTRONS RIGHT

If we're going to get the intelligence right, we need to get the electrons right. Data is everything. Whether looking for strategic trends or conducting tactical-level analysis associated with individuals and networks, data is the lifeblood of the CT community.

The data challenges we face are extraordinarily complex, particularly when we're dealing with information that is invariably incomplete, generally ambig-

“Ten years ago this month, a Nigerian father walked into the embassy in Abuja and said his son may be associated with extremists in Yemen. That cable was available to every CT analyst in the U.S. government—it got no attention, and a month later he tried to blow up NW Flight 253 over Detroit.”

uous, and often wrong. For example, [T]en years ago this month, a Nigerian father walked into the embassy in Abuja and said his son may be associated with extremists in Yemen. That cable was available to every CT analyst in the U.S. government—it got no attention, and a month later he tried to blow up NW Flight 253 over Detroit. Other data existed, but the relationship wasn't obvious, and we didn't connect the dots.

I've spent my entire career working analytic issues and will say unequivocally that counterterrorism has the worst signal-to-noise ratio of any discipline I've ever worked.

If I put you in the shoes of an NCTC analyst who has been working CT since 9/11, he or she has seen a quarter of million threats come across the screen; the overwhelming majority were bogus. But when they come in, how exactly do you know?

- To get a little more concrete: we average about three hundred threats to our embassies and consulates abroad every year—almost one a day.
- To get even a little more concrete: my ops center receives something in excess of 10,000 terrorism-related intelligence reports a day through which we need to sift. And those 10,000 reports contain 16,000 names. Daily.

All our services are challenged by the need to process ever-expanding amounts of data in order to uncover potential terrorist plots. With the growth of captured media on the battlefield, or the explosion of social media, the magnitude of the problem only gets worse.

Terrorists have to communicate, move money, and travel, but strictly speaking these data sets aren't "terrorism information" so they can quickly implicate legal,

policy, privacy, and operational equities that limit the sharing and processing of such information. Determining which information is relevant, and addressing the competing equities associated with processing data remains a work in progress.

I will never have enough analysts to process the available information, so artificial intelligence and machine learning are not “nice to have”—they are an imperative. As such, I noted that earlier this week, the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, chaired by Eric Schmidt, former Executive Chairman of Google, issued its interim report. Here’s a quote from that report:

With respect to data, the government is well positioned to collect useful information from its worldwide network of sensors. But much of that data is unlabeled, hidden in various silos across disparate networks, or inaccessible to the government...Even more data is simply expelled as “exhaust” because it is not deemed to be immediately relevant.

And the infrastructure is woefully inadequate. We have a long way to go to realize the benefits of artificial intelligence and machine learning.

In the case of terrorism, the problem is particularly difficult because so much of our data is unstructured. And it’s all unstructured in different ways. That makes it very hard for machines to help us.

Hearken back to what I said about the evolving nature of the threat—it’s all about individuals and networks. As we see with homeland violent extremists, it can be extraordinarily difficult to uncover these individuals. The haystack has continued to grow and the needles are increasingly subtle; as such, prioritization becomes difficult. We are seeing this problem across the Western world where partners may be dealing with thousands or tens of thousands of radicalized individuals and subjects of interest.

THEME 7: A RHETORICAL QUESTION—WHAT DOES AMERICA WANT US TO DO IN THE REALM OF “DISCOVERY”?

Terrorism, like all transnational threats, poses unique challenges because it blurs concepts like “foreign” and “domestic.” As such, our efforts to ensure public safety can quickly bump up against issues of privacy.

Part of the government’s response after 9/11 was to provide NCTC with very broad authorities to receive terrorism information. In my opinion, that was a very good move. And with that came an extensive oversight and compliance regime, and I’m extraordinarily proud of the center’s record in this regard. Indeed, my

experience has been that the entire community is very conscientious about these issues.

But looking forward, and given the pace of technological change, it seems to me the issues are going to become more difficult and the need for an informed, transparent public discussion becomes greater. How do we square the circle—keeping the country safe in a world of transnational threats that straddle the foreign and domestic divide, yet adequately balancing the protection of legitimate privacy rights? There’s no consensus.

The notion of “discovery” is a case in point—linking nonobvious relationships and finding “unknown unknowns” (so-called dot connecting). How much can we, should we, do?

The processing of inexplicable amounts of information is enormously complex and defies any simple solution. International cyber criminals, terrorists, proliferators, and transnational criminals have linkages into the U.S. They may be U.S. persons with foreign connections. Or they may travel here, call here, or use our financial institutions. They use our openness against us.

Exploiting the attributes of globalization, terrorists can easily hide in the daily noise associated with millions of people that cross our borders...or the trillions of dollars that slosh around globally...or the unimaginable amounts of telecommunications activity. And in virtually all cases the data associated with these nefarious actors is sitting side by side in data repositories that also hold information on completely innocent U.S. persons.

There are a lot of complicated challenges that limit our ability to do discovery:

- In the case of the 12/25 “underwear bomber” it was a function of dots being lost in the background noise and an inability to discern nonobvious relationships between two apparently innocuous pieces of information.
- In other cases, relevant data may exist in various department and agency repositories, but, for operational, law enforcement, or privacy reasons the information is not broadly available; retention and subsequent use issues are major limitations when it comes to co-mingling such information.
- And in still other cases, for instance in the case of financial data, the relevant information resides in entirely separate repositories that preclude large scale cross-stovepipe analysis.

Defaulting to slogans like the “need to balance privacy and security” may sound superficially attractive, but it isn’t really helpful: which electrons should be accessible to which organizations, when, and for what purpose. Let me pose a few representative questions:

- First, what level and type of CT risk should we be willing to tolerate in order to preserve critical freedoms and liberties—and perhaps most importantly, how can the national security community structure a dialogue with the American public to constructively address this question?
- Second, how, as a national security community, do we govern and approach exploitation of the Internet, particularly at a time when (a) technology is far outpacing legal and policy rulemaking and (b) we're able to find information on the Internet that is far more rich, valuable and intrusive than other types of collection subject to strict constitutional and statutory regulation?
- Third, what is the role of the private sector in national security and CT activities? Is there a point at which private sector and government are collaborating so closely—particularly in the area of data collection—that there is an intolerable privacy risk to individuals?
- I suspect these kinds of questions and the associated tradeoffs are going to be increasingly important as we look to the future.

Now, let me move away from electrons back to broader national security issues for the last three themes.

THEME 8: THE NEED FOR WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT

Counterterrorism intelligence integration across all relevant departments and agencies, particularly in an era of constrained resources, will be both critical and, I suspect, increasingly difficult. It will also be insufficient. As we've found over the past two decades, we need "whole of government" integration—and that's always been a challenge.

"Counterterrorism intelligence integration across all relevant departments and agencies... will be both critical and, I suspect, increasingly difficult. It will also be insufficient."

As any practitioner will acknowledge, the reality of the way the government is configured limits interagency effectiveness.

We are a government of departmental sovereignty—the way we're designed, the way money is appropriated, and the way congressional oversight works.

We have hardwired silos of excellence across the government. This is certainly not a new issue; endless studies have been written about the interagency process.

The 9/11 Commission had it about right: "It is hard to break down stovepipes

where there are so many stoves that are legally and politically entitled to have cast-iron pipes of their own.” But it is not impossible. One very good example was the post-9/11 watch listing and screening architecture that brought together the entirety of the government. But even that has been under stress as departments and agencies begin to adjust to evolving priorities.

NCTC’s Directorate of Strategic Operational Planning has a role in convening the interagency to develop whole of government CT strategies. Arguably, the CT enterprise is more coordinated than any other mission, in part because of these efforts. That said, integration efforts such as these will always struggle in a system of departmental sovereignty and in the absence of sufficient authorities to compel cooperation.

Now in theory, integration happens at the National Security Council. It largely did in the years after 9/11—CT was major focus at the most senior levels of the government because of the imminence of the threat. During a high-threat environment when we were routinely seeing major al Qaeda plots, tremendous interagency attention at all levels was devoted to terrorism. There were multiple Deputies and Principals Committee meetings every week.

Understandably, as the perceived threat declined, so did the degree of interagency focus. In addition, there’s been a degree of downsizing and deemphasizing National Security Council integration—a trend that goes back to the last administration. There’s been a sense that decisions could be kicked back to departments and agencies, partly because of a perception of “micromanagement” and partly borne of a desire to wean departments and agencies off of relying on the NSC. We need to watch this very carefully to determine how well it does or doesn’t work.

There’s no question the NSC will continue to handle the very highest priority policy issues. But what happens when lesser important questions aren’t recognized as important—until they are?

Remember, it was the very arcane subject of watch listing and screening that failed the country leading up to 9/11. And it was the technical issue of classified network access that gave rise to WikiLeaks and eventually Snowden. How do we ensure lower visibility issues that implicate multiple department and agency equities get adequately addressed before they become strategic failures?

Finally, one result of a decline in NSC engagement is the potential for loss of interagency muscle memory. This could be incredibly important in the event of a need for a rapid response during a crisis.

Terrorism, like any transnational threat, necessitates a whole-of-government response. As we move forward, we’ll need to ensure that there are ample interagency mechanisms to effect such coordination.

THEME 9: THE NEED FOR WHOLE-OF-SOCIETY

As we look to the future, we need to look beyond whole-of-government. Terrorist use of the Internet will require a robust partnership between government and the technology industry to prevent the distribution of propaganda, communication with supporters, and proliferation of information to support attacks.

Over the past two years, there has been a marked increase in industries' willingness to work with one another, the U.S. government and foreign partners to counter terrorism through the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT). Originally created by Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter, and YouTube, GIFCT provided a vehicle for discussions and potential information sharing.

There has been some substantial progress:

- Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have publicly reported that they detect over 90 percent of terrorist content through automated technology, meaning much of it is removed immediately after it is uploaded and never reaches the platform for public consumption.
- So far this year, YouTube has suspended over 42,000 channels and removed over 163,000 videos for promotion of terrorism; Facebook removed 6.4 million pieces of terrorist content in the first three months of this year; and Twitter suspended 166,000 unique accounts in the second half of last year for promotion of terrorism.

The recent move to establish GIFCT as an independent organization, or NGO, offers a more formalized opportunity to better leverage the respective strengths of the private sector and the U.S. government against this dynamic problem. The new construct looks to sustain and deepen industry collaboration and capacity, while incorporating the advice of key civil society and government stakeholders.

While it remains to be seen what role government entities will play within this construct, success against the future online terrorism threat will likely only be realized through greater transparency in information sharing across the public and private divide in near real-time.

Current transparency reports provided by the GIFCT members pertaining to their content take-down efforts provide government entities with a snapshot of the scope and scale of the problem, but typically lack sufficient detail on the methods and the type of material that is being purged.

Government efforts to support technology companies could be better targeted with greater knowledge of the actual content being removed, the geolocation of its origin, and potential attribution. From this information, government entities would be able to more effectively assess trends in terrorist propaganda, identify

new and emerging groups, key radicalizers, and credibility of potential plots. New insight could then be passed back to the companies to enhance their models/algorithms.

None of this will be easy. Companies' willingness to more robustly engage governments depends on a host of policy, legal, and proprietary concerns. But if we can mutually work through the impediments, there is no question that transparency would pay dividends.

Additional constructs might warrant consideration. I worked transnational organized crime at the National Security Council and found public/private partnerships like the National Cyber-Forensics & Training Alliance in Pittsburgh to be a very useful platform. A 501(c)(3), the NCFTA brings together government and private-sector representatives for the purposes of information sharing in the cybercrime arena; both government and the private sector have found the construct to be valuable.

As the threat evolves, we need to evolve. And that brings me to the last theme.

THEME 10: GETTING OUR ARMS AROUND THE GLOBAL DIMENSIONS OF NON-ISLAMIST TERRORISM

Nothing highlights the evolving nature of the terrorist threat more than the growth of what some call DT. Others may call it “right wing” or “white supremacist” terrorism, and still others call it racially motivated violent extremism, or RMVE for short.

The FBI clearly has the lead on purely domestic terrorism. What I want to focus on here are global dimensions and the potential for a “movement.”

The increasingly transnational nature of RMVE, facilitated by social media and online communication, has resulted in an environment that features frequent communication between sympathizers and an open exchange of ideas. A large percentage of RMVE attackers in recent years have either displayed outreach to like-minded individuals or groups, or referenced earlier attackers as sources of inspiration.

For instance, Anders Breivik, Dylann Roof, and Brenton Tarrant have gained international reverence and are serving as inspiration for many [racially motivated violent extremists], including those looking to plan or conduct attacks.

- Breivik has inspired—or at least been praised or researched by—at least five RMVE attackers or plotters since 2014, spanning from the U.S. to the UK, Germany, and New Zealand.

- Roof has inspired at least two attackers or plotter since his June 2015 attack against a historic black church in Charleston, South Carolina.
- Tarrant—who himself was inspired by Breivik, and praised Roof, [Alexandre] Bissonnette, and other RMVE attackers—has inspired at least three attackers since his March 2019 attack in Christchurch, New Zealand.

The connections go beyond inspiration. We see overseas travel by white supremacists to fight in conflict areas, communications amongst racially motivated violent extremists, and the provision of funds. Some of this involves connections to nonviolent, but extreme “right wing” organizations. Some of this involves connections to active paramilitary groups or those that have been banned or designated as terrorist organizations by other countries, and some of this involves connections between like-minded individuals who might or might not someday move from exploring an extreme ideology to radicalization to mobilization to violence.

We don’t fully understand how attackers are influenced and what constitutes meaningful relationships between extremists. Unlike Islamist extremism that in recent years has been led by relatively large and hierarchical organizations like al Qaeda and ISIS, RMVE does not feature authoritative or structured organizations or a monolithic ideology. Instead, it is dominated by lone attackers and small cells who use the online space as a borderless safe haven. They are inspired by a number of perceived concerns, including political, social, economic, legal, demographic, environmental, and personal issues.

Moving forward, we will have to address a host of issues. Fortunately, there are lessons learned from our work in Islamist IT that could be applicable in the DT/RMVE space: whole-of-government, improved information sharing, a focus on individuals and facilitation networks, and working with the private sector and foreign partners.

That said, there are some challenges unique to this problem set:

- The lack of a DT statute and associated material support charges
- The added complexity of constitutionally protected free speech and the associated differences between the United States and our partners
- And, the fact that perpetrators are often lone actors substantially complicates the kinds of designations used in IT

But I’d also highlight two broader issues:

- First, for almost two decades, the U.S. has pointed abroad at countries who are exporters of extreme Islamist ideology. We are now being seen as

exporters of white supremacist ideology. That's a reality with which we are going to have to deal.

- Second, as we grapple with how to deal with a global RMVE movement, we need to be careful. In the case of the international Islamist terrorist threat, we lost some control of the narrative; amongst vulnerable Sunni populations radicalization has succeeded under the pretense that the West is conducting a war against Islam. False, but effective.

We need to guard against that in the RMVE space—we must disaggregate—appropriately dealing with violent white supremacist activity while not being perceived as painting with too broad a brush and impinging on legitimate right-wing political activity and free speech.

Keeping control of the narrative and creating the international toolbox for that particular disaggregation is going to be tricky but absolutely necessary so as not to make the problem worse than it already is.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, let me take you back to the questions I posed at the outset and on the Hill:

- What does the national risk equation look like as the country confronts a very complex international security environment?
- How do we optimize our CT resources in the best interests of the country when departments and agencies may have somewhat differing priorities?
- And if we're going to reduce efforts against terrorism, how do we do so in a manner that doesn't inadvertently reverse the gains of the past eighteen years?

Reasonable people could answer those questions in different ways. The answers are most assuredly not self-evident, and they deserve informed consideration by thought leaders inside and outside the government.

I do believe that the ten themes I've laid out just now—that involve focusing on all aspects of the current and future terrorist threat, addressing a host of “must dos,” and resolving a series of complicated, emotive issues—those themes will help us inform and develop a good government risk assessment as we move forward.

Thanks very much.

The Evolving and Persistent Terrorism Threat to the Homeland

Matthew Alcoke

Deputy Assistant Director of the FBI's Counterterrorism Division

First and foremost, I would like to thank you for the invitation to be part of The Washington Institute's Counterterrorism Lecture Series. It is an honor to represent the FBI and to speak to you at this esteemed event. Today, I will discuss the ever-evolving terrorism landscape, with an eye to the Homeland. My intent is to provide an overview of the threat as we see it at the FBI today, including the investigative challenges and opportunities presented by this shifting paradigm.

To level set before we begin, I'd like to explain how the FBI works counterterrorism. The FBI categorizes terrorism investigations into two programs: international terrorism and domestic terrorism. International terrorism includes investigations into members of designated foreign terrorist organizations, state sponsors of terrorism, and homegrown violent extremists. The latter are individuals inside the United States, who have been radicalized primarily in the United States, and who are inspired by, but not receiving individual direction from, foreign terrorist organizations.

Domestic terrorists are individuals who commit violent criminal acts in furtherance of ideological goals stemming from domestic issues. A majority of our domestic terrorism cases fall into one of four categories: racially motivated violent extremism, antigovernment/anti-authority extremism, animal rights/environmental extremism, and abortion extremism.

Because of the interests of the audience here today, my comments will focus largely on the international terrorism threat to the U.S. But to be clear, preventing acts of terrorism, regardless of ideology, is the FBI's number one priority.

I'd like to set the stage by discussing the FBI's evolution in the eighteen years since 9/11, and why we are stronger, more agile, and better able to confront the threat of terrorism—both international and domestic. After the 9/11 attacks, we asked ourselves, “What could we have done better?” And every day since, we have asked ourselves, “What do we need to do to keep the American people safe from terrorism today, tomorrow, and the day after that?”

We've torn down walls separating agencies and preventing collaboration. We've significantly improved the way we share information, not just among law enforcement and the intelligence community but also with the private sector and foreign partners. Sharing is now the rule rather than the exception.

“Because of this increased collaboration, we've developed a whole-of-government approach to combatting terrorism over the past eighteen years.”

Because of this increased collaboration, we've developed a whole-of-government approach to combatting terrorism over the past eighteen years. During the course of our investigations, we bring the full force of the U.S. intelligence, law enforcement, and judicial system to bear against these actors.

Underpinning all of our successes is our commitment to partnerships. In fact, one of the most critical elements of the FBI's counterterrorism strategy is the Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF), a partnership between law enforcement at the federal, state, and local levels committed to preventing acts of terrorism.

The FBI has JTTFs in all fifty-six of our field offices around the country, with over four thousand investigators, bringing a holistic capability to the fight. It's an integrated investigative approach to terrorist detection and prevention.

What hasn't changed is the FBI's commitment to preventing all acts of terrorism in the United States and against U.S. interests overseas. The whole-of-government approach we now bring to the counterterrorism mission positions us to best address the dynamic threat that we face today.

Eighteen years after 9/11, what does this terrorism threat look like? I'll begin with what we might consider “longstanding” terrorism threats emanating from overseas groups. We are certainly still laser-focused on foreign terrorist organizations like al-Qa'ida and ISIS. As you know, these organizations wish to cause us harm, and pose the biggest Sunni terrorist threat to U.S. interests overseas. Simply put, the lethal threat from these groups persists despite significant setbacks and defeats.

Al-Qa'ida in particular has proven resilient, despite the death of Usama bin Laden in 2011. AQ's desire to carry out large-scale, spectacular attacks in the United States is clear. And we're also paying attention to al-Qa'ida's affiliates, like al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula and al-Qa'ida in Syria.

As we continue to monitor the situation in Syria, we know the threat from ISIS remains, despite its loss of territory, resources, and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Even after suffering significant defeats, ISIS can now rely on global support from its branches.

Of particular concern within our own borders, ISIS's model of online recruitment and propaganda encourages supporters to take action against soft targets from wherever they are located.

We've seen this call to action through online channels play out across America. In March, a man arrested not too far from here in Maryland admitted to planning a vehicle-ramming attack in the name of ISIS. And in August, authorities disrupted a plot to conduct a stabbing in Queens on behalf of the terrorist organization. Neither of these individuals received specific direction from ISIS in their attack plan but sought out and found propaganda online, which inspired them to plot an attack.

In addition to countering the threat from Sunni terrorist groups, we have worked to mitigate the threat from Iranian-supported groups who are plotting and conducting attacks. We know the government of Iran aims to preserve the regime and export its Islamic revolution worldwide, through the use of its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Qods Force (IRGC-QF), its strategic partner Hizballah, and its proxy groups positioned to harm U.S. interests in the Middle East.

The threat has also reached our shores. Recently, two men pleaded guilty to conducting surveillance against Jewish and Israeli facilities, and against Iranian dissidents in the U.S. at the direction of the government of Iran.

Although these foreign terrorist groups and state actors have suffered significant defeats through military and intelligence efforts by the U.S. and others, we can't take our eye off the ball. Their violent determination persists.

I'll end here with discussing these organizations and nation-states, because I'd like to also discuss how the threat has evolved within our borders. A decade ago, these organizations posed the largest terrorist threat to the U.S. Today, as evidenced by recent attacks, the greatest threat we face in the homeland emanates from self-radicalized lone actors, of any ideology, who look to attack soft targets with easily accessible weapons.

These lone actors span our international and domestic terrorism cases and include homegrown violent extremists, inspired by foreign terrorist organizations, and domestic violent extremists, inspired to commit violence in furtherance of domestic ideologies.

Homeland plotting shifted from in-person networks motivated by local radicalizers to self-starting violent extremists inspired by online ideologues and propaganda. We are seeing the Internet and social media enable individuals to engage and encourage other like-minded individuals without face-to-face meetings. As

“An individual sitting in front of a computer in one country can communicate with, encourage, and inspire multiple extremist actors thousands of miles away.”

FBI director Christopher Wray often says, “Terrorism moves at the speed of social media.” We find that to be true every day in our investigations.

An individual sitting in front of a computer in one country can communicate with, encourage, and inspire multiple extremist actors thousands of miles away. Social media

provides an avenue for the rapid movement of information in a realm where radicalization is often a personal and anonymous process.

As you can imagine, law enforcement, the intelligence community, and academics aim to better understand this threat and determine commonalities, or a profile, of lone offenders. Several academic and government studies have supported the FBI’s longstanding assessment that there is no useful demographic profile of lone offender terrorists. While attackers are mostly male and born in the U.S., the similarities largely stop there. We’ve seen attackers span all ends of the economic and political spectrums, with varying occupations, levels of education, marital statuses, and religions.

One interesting demographic trend we can point to over the past two years is a decrease in the average age of attackers. In 2018, juveniles comprised nearly one-third of all identified Homeland attackers and plotters inspired by foreign terrorist organizations like ISIS and al-Qa’ida. This underscores the susceptibility of some adolescents to ideologies that appeal to a desire for a sense of belonging or identity.

Studies have also revealed that most successful attackers typically mobilize to violence in less than six months. This commonality emphasizes the unpredictability of our subjects and demonstrates the “flash to bang” mobilization lifespan, or case velocity as we call it. We may not have long to act to prevent an attack.

Additionally, while government and law enforcement facilities still represent attractive targets for violent extremists, recent attackers favored easy-to-acquire weapons—often firearms—against soft or civilian targets, hampering detection efforts. These targets, favored by attackers since 2016, have included: a high school cafeteria, a bus terminal, NYC pedestrians, a festival, and a retail center.

Selecting familiar targets reduces the need for pre-attack reconnaissance, again limiting opportunities for detection by law enforcement or bystanders.

In recent years, we have also seen individuals, particularly juveniles, mix multiple extremist ideologies to develop unique personalized justifications for violence. Often elements of these ideologies are opposed to each other. In short, ideologically fluid extremists may be drawn more to violence than to the ideology itself.

I want to turn now to an issue continuing to limit law enforcement's ability to disrupt these increasingly insular actors. We're all familiar with the inability of law enforcement agencies to access data, even with a lawful warrant or court order, due to encryption.

In recent years, the FBI observed a decline in its ability to access to the content of both domestic and international terrorist communications, due to the widespread adoption of encryption for Internet traffic, and the prevalence of mobile messaging apps using end-to-end encryption as default. In many places, we have effectively "gone dark."

As a private citizen, I certainly appreciate encryption's increase in the overall safety and security of the Internet for users. But in fulfilling the FBI's duty to the American people to prevent acts of terrorism, encryption creates serious challenges. Accessing content of communications by, or data held by, known or suspected terrorists pursuant to judicially authorized, warranted legal process is getting more and more difficult.

If law enforcement loses the ability to detect criminal activity because communication between subjects—data "in motion"—or data held by subjects—data "at rest"—is encrypted in such a way making content inaccessible, even with a lawful order, our ability to protect the American people will be degraded. I believe there are solutions providers could deploy which would provide safety and security to those using the Internet while also contributing to the FBI's ability to prevent and investigate terrorism and other criminal acts like child exploitation and cybercrimes.

The online, encrypted nature of radicalization, along with the insular nature of most of today's attack plotters, leaves investigators with fewer dots to connect. With this insular threat, we increasingly rely on the bystanders in these actors' networks—family members, peers, community leaders, and strangers—to notice changes in behavior, and report concerns, before violence occurs.

One of the intelligence community's flagship initiatives for increasing bystander reporting is the "Homegrown Violent Extremist Mobilization Indicators" booklet. This unclassified booklet, produced jointly by FBI, NCTC, and DHS, describes observable indicators that someone may be preparing to engage in violent extremist activity. The indicators cover activities observable online, by family or friends, religious leaders, and private-sector companies such as those in the financial or shipping industry. You may think of this as the "See something, say something" campaign for the modern threat.

This summer, a man living in Pittsburgh was arrested by an FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force on charges related to his alleged plot to bomb a church in the name of ISIS. The subject allegedly distributed propaganda materials and recorded a video of himself pledging allegiance to ISIS—observable mobilization indicators

of imminent or near-term concern, according to the indicators booklet.

While family members and close friends likely are best positioned to observe concerning behaviors, previous research has determined family members and peers often are resistant to sharing their concerns with authorities, which further complicates detection efforts. Our JTTFs are hard at work, engaging with the public, and our private sector partners to equip them with resources for reporting concerning behavior to law enforcement. With this shift in the terrorism threat, we recognize that tips from the public will be one of the most powerful tools we have in detecting and preventing attacks.

Despite the successes that result from the hard work of the men and women of the FBI, our Joint Terrorism Task Forces, and our partners across the government, terrorism continues to pose a persistent threat to the Homeland and our interests overseas.

“As we saw just recently, with the arrest of a man in Pueblo, Colorado, who allegedly planned to bomb a synagogue, lone actors pose a lethal terrorism threat to the American people.”

As we saw just recently, with the arrest of a man in Pueblo, Colorado, who allegedly planned to bomb a synagogue in furtherance of his ideology, lone actors pose a lethal terrorism threat to the American people. But this case also highlights the power of the Joint Terrorism Task Force—whose reach extends from coast to coast and around the globe and is a force multiplier in the fight

against terrorism. Together with our partners, we stand shoulder to shoulder and remain vigilant against these threats.

It’s been said, “It takes a network to defeat a network.” While the whole-of-government approach has been successful in mitigating many of the threats posed by overseas terrorism networks, a whole-of-society approach will be required to mitigate the evolving lone offender terrorism threat within our borders.

The FBI and our partners will continue to confront the threat posed by terrorists with determination and dedication to our mission to protect the American people and uphold the Constitution of the United States.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be here today. I look forward to answering any questions you might have.

The DEA's Targeting of Hezbollah's Global Criminal Support Network

John Fernandez, *Assistant Special Agent in Charge of the Special Operations Division's Counter-Narcoterrorism Operations Center*

RAPPORTEUR'S SUMMARY

As part of an effort to bring together the intelligence, law enforcement, and military communities in the fight against narcoterrorism and money laundering linked to terrorist organizations, the DEA established the Counter-Narcoterrorism Operations Center (CNTOC) in the wake of the September 11 attacks. Today, CNTOC plays two primary roles. First, it shares non-drug-related terrorism information generated from its global operations with the FBI and other agencies that have primary investigative authorities for that information. Second, it conducts its own investigations at the nexus of narcotics and terrorism, focusing on “convergence targets” such as money launderers and sanctions violators.

Of the sixty-eight groups designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations by the State Department, the DEA has linked twenty-five of them to the drug trade. The legal provisions included in 21 U.S.C. 960a have proven useful in expanding the agency's authorities to target narco-terrorists, and although DEA cases do not always result in terrorism-related charges, the agency uses the evidence and means at its disposal to determine the most easily prosecutable offenses.

The DEA has the largest U.S. law enforcement presence overseas and an extensive source network, both of which have helped

“The DEA has the largest U.S. law enforcement presence overseas and an extensive source network, both of which have helped collect intelligence on terrorist tactics like the use of improvised explosive devices in Afghanistan.”

collect intelligence on terrorist tactics like the use of improvised explosive devices in Afghanistan, as well as on organizations such as Lebanese Hezbollah, the Taliban, the Islamic State, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and Colombia's National Liberation Army (ELN). Moreover, a DEA source was critical in foiling the 2011 Iranian plot to kill Saudi ambassador Adel al-Jubeir in Washington. (Iranian American suspect Mansour Arbabsiar had attempted to hire a DEA informant whom he believed to be a member of the Zetas drug cartel to conduct the assassination.)

Hezbollah is a unique target for the DEA due to several characteristics: its high level of sophistication; its hierarchical, compartmentalized structure; its combination of widespread political, military, criminal, and social activities; and its deadly targeting of Americans (prior to the September 11 attacks, Hezbollah had killed more Americans than any other FTO). Today, the Trump administration considers Hezbollah a high national security priority and has spearheaded a robust, cross-government effort aimed at stifling its activities.

Hezbollah's criminal support network dates to the 1990s, when Imad Mughniyah, head of the group's External Security Organization, sought to establish a supplemental source of funding besides the money it received from Iran. This criminal network expanded even further as a result of financial burdens incurred during the 2006 Lebanon war.

The DEA's targeting of Hezbollah began about thirteen years ago with Operation Titan, which intercepted the sale of multi-ton cocaine shipments by Hezbollah associates in cooperation with the Colombian drug cartel La Oficina de Envigado. Notable cases since then have included Lebanese-Colombian drug kingpin Ayman Joumaa and the Lebanese Canadian Bank.

In the past six years, the DEA provided assistance that led to the arrests of a number of prominent actors in Hezbollah's global criminal support network, including Ali Fayyad (2014), Ali Koleilat (2014), Altaf Khanani (2015), Hassan Mansour (2015), and Ibrahim Ahmadoun (2015). In 2016, Operation Cedar targeted an international money laundering scheme, leading to the arrests of Hezbollah operative Mohamad Nouredine and others via concurrent raids in Belgium, France, Germany, and Italy. CINTOC financial investigators also played a central role in the arrest and indictment of Kassim Tajideen, a Hezbollah financier sentenced to five years in prison and ordered to forfeit \$50 million in August 2019.

In all, relevant DEA field investigations have spanned six continents and focused extensively on individuals in Europe, Mexico, the Tri-Border Area, Venezuela, and West Africa. Since 2017, DEA efforts on this front have collectively resulted in seventeen indictments, fourteen arrests, three extraditions, and nine designations of Hezbollah-linked individuals through the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). In addition, there are four pending arrests,

eight pending indictments, and four pending extraditions on the near horizon.

Hezbollah increasingly relies on criminal revenue streams from a wide array of sources that include the Lebanese diaspora, group members, affiliates, sympathizers, and unwitting collaborators. The organization has even competed for money laundering contracts in the same manner as Colombian cartels and other criminal organizations. OFAC designations are therefore an especially useful tool in targeting Hezbollah supporters. Whether singly or introduced concurrently with a criminal indictment (the most potent option), they help stymie revenue streams, isolate Hezbollah from its associates, provide a basis for criminal charges, and discredit the group's leadership.

The degree to which Hezbollah values criminal proceeds and fears the idea of operatives being placed under U.S. custody is apparent in the pressure that the group and Iran have placed on governments that take action against such operatives. For example, after drug and arms traffickers Ali Fayyad, Khaled Merebi, and Faouzi Jaber were arrested in the Czech Republic in 2014, individuals related to Fayyad kidnapped five Czech military officers in Lebanon. The officers were returned in exchange for Fayad and Merebi's release.

In 2017, operative Ali Koleilat was extradited from Belgium to the United States after intelligence uncovered Hezbollah plots aimed at securing his release. Among these threats were plans to assassinate the prosecutors involved in his case and kidnap a Belgian defense attaché in Beirut.

That same year, Iran-related elements allegedly sought to bribe the Moroccan government after it arrested Kassim Tajideen. To their credit, the Moroccans resisted Iranian political pressure and expedited his extradition to the United States. Partly due to this decision, Tehran severed diplomatic ties with Rabat in 2018.

Regarding the amount of Hezbollah's revenue obtained through criminal ventures, a precise figure is unknown, but unofficial estimates have placed it as low as 10 percent. Yet success can be further measured through fallout information on Hezbollah's lost revenue, impediments to its capabilities, loss of morale, and reputational costs.

As for interactions with U.S. foreign partners, the DEA works closely with numerous countries on these issues. Because many European partners still have not designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization in its entirety, the agency has found it constructive to leave out the terrorist label in briefings. Referring to Hezbollah's drug/arms trafficking and money laundering activities while side-stepping terrorism helps avoid political sensitivities. Yet complications sometimes arise in messaging after arrests. For example, the United States wanted to highlight Hezbollah's links in press releases about Operation Cedar, to the chagrin of several European allies.

Regarding Hezbollah's relationship with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the criminal activities carried out by the two organizations often overlap. Like Hezbollah, Iran has turned to criminal revenue streams to offset

“Like Hezbollah, Iran has turned to criminal revenue streams to offset the financial constraints imposed by U.S. Treasury sanctions and its own expenditures on proxy wars.”

the financial constraints imposed by U.S. Treasury sanctions and its own expenditures on proxy wars. Additionally, the DEA has received information on Iranian embassies being used in furtherance of Hezbollah criminal enterprises. For example, diplomatic pouches have reportedly been used to transport narcotics at times. And while Iran is Hezbollah's principal funder, the group's

illicit proceeds are sometimes used to line Iran's coffers.

In Syria, Hezbollah has used its drug proceeds to buy arms for fighters on behalf of the Assad regime, with senior commander Ali Fayyad and another individual believed to be involved in the purchases. Hezbollah also protects smuggling routes in the so-called Shia Crescent, including in Syria. Reporting indicates that marijuana, Captagon, and other drugs are now being heavily trafficked by Syrian military intelligence.

Officials at the top of Hezbollah's hierarchy have given a green light to, turned a blind eye to, and/or actively directed many of these criminal activities, including security chief Wafiq Safa and Abdallah Safieddine, the group's representative to Iran and cousin to leader Hassan Nasrallah. The fact that Nasrallah has the ability to rein in these individuals but has chosen not to underscores how significant criminal revenue has become to the terrorist organization.

The Persistent Threat from the Islamic State and al-Qaeda: The View from the UN

Edmund Fitton-Brown, *Coordinator of the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Concerning the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and the Taliban*

The Monitoring Team was created in 2004 to support the committee charged with implementing UNSCR 1267 (1999) and imposing sanctions on the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and those individuals, groups, and entities associated with these terrorist organizations. Through a succession of update resolutions between then and 2017, the team now supports two successor UNSC committees: the “Security Council Committee pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011), and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da’esh), Al-Qaida, and associated individuals, groups, undertakings, and entities” (aka the 1267 Committee), which focuses on ISIL and al-Qaeda, and the 1988 Sanctions Committee, which deals with sanctions relating to the Taliban.

Today, I will focus specifically on the team’s recent findings with regard to the global threat posed by ISIL and al-Qaeda. Before doing so, however, I will provide a brief overview of the mandate and responsibilities of the Monitoring Team.

The al-Qaeda Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team comprises ten experts from ten member states and is based in New York. It supports the Security Council by:

- Assessing the global threat from ISIL and al-Qaeda in biannual reports and in regular oral briefings to the 1267 Committee, and by drafting the threat part of the UN Secretary General’s regular ISIL report. In addition, once a year, we report on the threat posed by the Taliban to peace and stability in Afghanistan.

- Collecting information from member states on individuals and entities on the al-Qaeda and 1988 sanctions lists, to ensure these designations remain updated, accurate, and detailed enough for conclusive identification. In a similar vein, we travel extensively to member states to raise awareness of the sanctions regimes and generate new designation proposals.
- Preparing and presenting recommendations to make the three sanctions measures (asset freezes, travel bans, and/or arms embargoes) more effective. We also aim to improve sanctions implementation and member state compliance.

In furtherance of these missions, the team works on its global mandate with member states, UN missions and agencies, and other relevant bodies. For example, we collaborate with Interpol, the International Civil Aviation Organization, the World Customs Organization, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), and FATF's regional bodies. We also collaborate with relevant private sector entities in assessing the changing nature of the terrorist threat and enhancing sanctions compliance.

We are explicitly mandated to “consult in confidence with member states’ intelligence and security services,” distinguishing us from other UN entities. In this way, we offer a significant niche capability to the UN’s overall counterterrorism (CT) effort. Our assessment of the threat provides part of the basis for other UN CT entities’ issue prioritization.

Additionally, to support intra-UN synergies and efficiency, the team works with the Office of Counter-Terrorism and the Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate. We participate in the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy—including the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact and its working groups—and collaborate with other entities that are signatories to this framework.

The team also organizes periodic closed regional meetings for the CT leaderships of intelligence and security services in various strategic parts of the world, contributing to the UN objective of generating and enhancing cooperation between and amongst member states’ CT agencies. The team is also mandated by various resolutions to develop information on specific issues during our consultations with member states, including: foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), human trafficking, sexual violence, illicit trade in antiquities and cultural property, terror finance, links between terrorism and organized crime, terrorist acquisition of arms, and threats to aviation security.

KEY TRENDS IN THE THREAT LANDSCAPE

Regarding the global threat posed by ISIL and al-Qaeda, I will draw on the Monitoring Team’s twenty-fifth report, which was completed at the end of December 2019 and is now available online. Though the report covers the second half of 2019, I will also touch on several key developments from earlier last year in my remarks.

The first significant development that warrants mention is the military defeat of ISIL, completed in eastern Syria in March 2019. Although the fall of Baghuz marked the defeat of the “geographical caliphate,” it also precipitated a larger than expected movement of ISIL fighters, supporters, dependents, and other refugees and displaced persons. In light of mass internal displacement, overcrowding in refugee camps such as al-Hawl, and precarious holding arrangements, humanitarian and security challenges demand urgent attention. However, clear, comprehensive, and multilateral solutions remain elusive.

“In light of mass internal displacement, overcrowding in refugee camps such as al-Hawl [Syria], and precarious holding arrangements, humanitarian and security challenges demand urgent attention.”

The second event that I believe deserves attention is the Easter Sunday Sri Lanka bombings, during which three churches and three luxury hotels in Colombo were targeted, followed by smaller explosions at a housing complex in Dematagoda and a guesthouse in Dehiwala. The mass-casualty attacks—which killed 259 individuals, including twenty-five foreign nationals—are demonstrative of ISIL’s increasingly decentralized structure and international base of support. The group’s claim of responsibility via its Amaq News Agency on April 23, 2019, and the attackers’ inspiration by ISIL’s ideology illustrate the group’s ability to endure, recruit, and radicalize abroad, even absent direct command and control of attacks.

Indeed, ISIL-core had no advance warning of the Easter Sunday attacks. ISIL caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s late April reference was merely an afterthought. Nonetheless, an ISIL-inspired group had incubated in Sri Lanka and developed a significant capability. While it had foreign links, the cell was locally generated, financed, and led.

The shock value and scale of the Sri Lankan attacks were a boon to the home-grown terrorist threat. More ISIL-inspired attacks (though hopefully not on the same scale as Sri Lanka’s) are likely in 2020, with the added motive of avenging Baghdadi’s death. However, given that these inspired attacks tend to be unreliable and relatively low-impact, ISIL might also revive its own external operations capabilities.

THE CONTINUED THREAT IN IRAQ AND SYRIA

Today in Iraq and Syria, the process of stabilization and reconstruction remains slow. Political tensions do not help.

ISIL's covert network in Syria is being established at the provincial level, a mirror image of what we have seen in Iraq since 2017. In its core area, it is adapting, consolidating, creating conditions for its eventual resurgence. As the group grows in confidence, it is operating ever more openly.

Northwestern Syria is a base for many extremists, including FTFs. As the recent Monitoring Team report noted, member states continue to assess that between one half and two thirds of the more than 40,000 who joined the "caliphate" are still alive.

Al-Qaeda-aligned Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Hurras al-Din (HAD) also remain active in the area. While ISIL has taken a back seat in fighting Syrian forces (as long as it is able to retain a presence in the area), HTS currently has 12,000 to 15,000 fighters, mainly focused on combating Syrian government forces. HAD is assessed to have between 3,500 and 5,000 fighters and operates in Idlib and its surrounding areas.

The return to normal in Iraq and the Levant won't be easy, and absent political stability, there is a vacuum of power to be exploited by terrorists.

ISIL LEADERSHIP AND PLANNING: BAGHDADI TO QURAYSHI

The killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in late October was another key event of 2019. Before his death in Barisha, Baghdadi urged efforts to free ISIL fighters and dependents accommodated in facilities in northeastern Syria, such as al-Hawl refugee camp.

Many ISIL leaders are indeed hiding in Iraq and Syria. ISIL discriminates between its personnel, and while foot soldiers, including many FTFs, are seen as dispensable, key seniors are kept safe. In this vein, Syrian and Iraqi leaders are favored over their foreign counterparts.

ISIL's somewhat cavalier attitude toward its foreign contingent may cost the group in terms of future opportunities. In contrast with regular operations in the core area and some remote provinces, directed international attacks are still way down from their 2015–16 levels, as are the number of facilitated and inspired attacks.

This decline in external operations may not turn imminently, but with time

and space to recoup and reorganize in its safe haven, ISIL will once again start to project an organized threat. Once its survival is assured, ISIL will reinvest in its external operations capability, possibly in unexpected locations. We have seen signs of this happening with ISIL and al-Qaeda.

ISIL certainly has the financial reserves to assist in this. Some estimates place the group's finances at \$100–\$300 million. Additionally, member states have reported that ISIL in Iraq continued to finance its operations through investing in legitimate businesses and commercial fronts, including money exchange companies.

Turning to leadership succession, following Baghdadi's death and the public announcement of Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi as his successor, there has been unconfirmed reporting that Abu Ibrahim is Amir Muhammad Said Abdal Rahman al-Mawla, an established senior who previously served as Baghdadi's deputy.

After the announcement of Abu Ibrahim's appointment, the ISIL central media bureau choreographed through propaganda outlets a series of pledges of allegiance from supporters claiming to be in Sinai, Bangladesh, Somalia, Pakistan, Yemen, Khorasan Province (Afghanistan), and a number of other countries. But ISIL will find it hard to sustain this initial level of enthusiasm over Qurayshi without compromising the new leader's security.

Because putting Qurayshi on screen might pose danger to his security, the transition of authority might accelerate the delegation of authority from ISIL-core to its affiliates, even if Abu Ibrahim is al-Mawla and strategy remains consistent.

AL-QAEDA LEADERSHIP AND PLANNING: LOOKING AHEAD

We learned in September that Osama bin Laden's son Hamza had been killed some while ago. Meanwhile, current al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri is in poor health. Given these two developments, it is important to preemptively consider what direction Abu Muhammad al-Masri, Zawahiri's presumed successor, will take al-Qaeda.

“We learned in September that Osama bin Laden's son Hamza had been killed some while ago. Meanwhile, current al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri is in poor health.”

It is also interesting to note al-Qaeda's conservatism with regard to resourcing operations. Al-Qaeda tends to prioritize its administrative costs and salaries. Despite external attack ambitions by groups

like al-Qaeda-affiliated Hurras al-Din in Syria's Idlib province, such affiliates remain curtailed by both military pressure and al-Qaeda's own reluctance to resource such operations.

INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM: AFGHANISTAN, AFRICA, AND EUROPE

As the recent Monitoring Team report notes, "Afghanistan continues to be the conflict zone of greatest concern to member states outside the ISIL core area and suffers by some measures the heaviest toll from terrorism of any country in the world." ISIL's Khorasan Province (ISIL-K) remains the group's center of gravity in South Asia. In fact, the UN's 1267 Committee recently sanctioned ISIL-K as a separate entity. The group is resilient, launching attacks with impact disproportionate to its numbers, even in Kabul, where it conducts propaganda activities in madrasas and universities.

ISIL-K has had a difficult year, ending with eradication of its Nangarhar base. We now assess its fighting strength at no more than 2,500 individuals, the great majority of whom are currently in Kunar Province. Nonetheless, ISIL-K is still recruiting new members, and ISIL might develop an external operations capability in Afghanistan.

Many al-Qaeda and Taliban-aligned extremist groups are also present in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda's relationship with the Taliban continues to be close and mutually beneficial, with the former supplying resources and training in exchange for protection. Central Asian neighbors fear a potential cross-border threat from these as well as from ISIL.

Afghan politics and the peace process are evolving, and it is vital to revive talks and bring peace to Afghanistan; indeed, reconciliation is the main driver behind our 1988 work. However, there may be short term costs associated with peace negotiations, such as driving individuals to join ISIL-K and/or pursue terrorist plans more actively. It is not clear what impact diplomatic developments will have on the external threat, but if a peace agreement is reached, al-Qaeda intends to develop a new narrative to justify continuing the armed conflict in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, a continuum of instability is emerging in West Africa and the Sahel. Extremists threaten fragile regional states. Al-Qaeda-aligned Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (or JNIM) represents the principal international terrorist threat in the region, and its operational efficiency is maximized by deconfliction and operational collaboration with other terrorist groups active in the region,

such as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) in Mali and Niger and Ansarul Islam in Burkina Faso.

Particularly in Africa, ISIL has been devolving authority, allowing its most prominent affiliates to lead lesser ones in the same region. For example, IS West Africa Province (ISWAP) in Nigeria has grown in ambition and now claims attacks on behalf of ISGS.

Facing a different primary set of issues, in Europe, authorities seem at cross-purposes, unsure how best to handle domestic extremists, returning FTFs, and frustrated travelers. Radicalization in prisons and the release of extremist prisoners are also growing challenges, as demonstrated by the recent attacks by Usman Khan and Sudesh Amman in the United Kingdom. Additionally, many of the foreign terrorist fighters who received relatively short sentences upon their return to Europe prior to 2015 are expected to be released in the coming period. Many states in Europe, never mind poorer countries elsewhere, lack the resources to address this host of issues.

“Many of the foreign terrorist fighters who received relatively short sentences upon their return to Europe prior to 2015 are expected to be released in the coming period.”

CONCLUSION

ISIL’s military defeat and the death of Baghdadi should be welcomed as good news. But the whole nexus of post-caliphate issues—what to do with people who fought for ISIL, worked for it, and/or lived under it—is massive. More than 40,000 traveled to join this struggle; a rough calculation of the attrition rate suggests 25,000-plus FTFs may still be alive. We have detainees, fugitives, returnees, and relocators, and some dependents may also pose a potential threat.

The international community will face short, medium, and long-term risks if we mismanage these challenges. The fight against extremism is a generational problem. The case of an Indonesian FTF killed in Syria in 2018—himself the child of one of the bombers in the 2002 Bali bombing—exemplifies how mishandled grievances can fuel continued radicalization and recruitment.

Unfortunately, I believe the underlying conditions exist for this strain of jihadist terrorism to be with us for a long time, whether in the form of ISIL (under its more or less effective new leader), al-Qaeda (sooner or later under a successor to Zawahiri), mutations like jihadi nationalism, multi-group coalitions like JNIM, or a new brand as little known now as ISIL was before 2014.

Inside the DHS Prevention and Protection Mission Addressing Targeted Violence and Terrorism

Elizabeth Neumann, *Assistant Secretary for Threat Prevention and Security Policy, Department of Homeland Security*

We contend with a domestic threat environment that is very different from the one we faced even five years ago. The threat from domestic terrorist movements has risen, and authorities are now treating them as coequal to foreign terrorist organizations in priority. Last month, three different independent assessments reemphasized the growing challenge that racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists (REMVE) pose. On February 5, FBI director Christopher Wray noted that 2019 was domestic terrorists' deadliest year since the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. He has elevated REMVE to a national priority equal to that of ISIS and al-Qaeda.¹ On February 26, the Anti-Defamation League released a report concluding that 90 percent of the forty-two deaths attributable to domestic terrorist movements in 2019 were associated with REMVE ideologies and movements.² And

"FBI director Christopher Wray noted that 2019 was domestic terrorists' deadliest year since the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995."

the NGO Moonshot CVE reported last month that its tracking of online extremist content confirms that there is a global REMVE movement, with a robust presence on social media sites like Telegram.³ There have been thousands of Internet searches for REMVE content over the past ten months across numerous countries.

Further, terrorist groups have changed their tactics over time, in part because technologies that previously were unavailable to terrorist organizations have become more widely accessible to consumers, including terrorists. ISIS famously

mastered the art of leveraging the combination of social media and encrypted communications to widely disseminate its message, radicalize its target audience, mobilize followers to violence, and even provide them guidance and assistance remotely through the use of *virtual plotters* who are a part of the group's external operations bureaucracy. ISIS encouraged homegrown terrorists to bring their own weapons to the fight and eschew international travel in favor of acting at home. The late ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani exhorted followers to kill disbelieving Americans and Europeans "in any manner or way however it may be," providing a laundry list of techniques to be employed: "Smash his head with a rock, or slaughter him with a knife, or run him over with your car, or throw him down from a high place, or choke him, or poison him." There are now shorter planning cycles before attacks and consequently fewer opportunities for the intelligence community and law enforcement to identify and interdict those preparing to engage in acts of terrorism.

The rise of a global REMVE threat combined with the continued determination al-Qaeda and ISIS place on attacking the homeland complicates DHS's operational approach to preventing attacks from terrorist groups. But in addition to terrorism, no description of the domestic threat landscape can be considered complete absent mention of the continued drumbeat of attacks that can be defined as targeted violence. Targeted violence includes attacks that lack political, ideological, or religious motivation (i.e., terrorism) but where the attacker intends to inflict casualties or destroy property commensurate with the damage done in a terrorist attack. Examples of targeted violence include the slaying of fifty-eight concertgoers in Las Vegas in 2017, the killing of twelve employees in DC's Navy Yard in 2013, and the infamous massacre of twenty-six grade school students and their teachers in Newtown, Connecticut, in 2012. In August 2019 alone, we witnessed barbarous attacks that claimed innocent lives at an annual garlic festival in Gilroy, California; at a chain store in El Paso, Texas; in an entertainment district in Dayton, Ohio; and on the streets of the Texas cities of Midland and Odessa. This rash of killing left many Americans to wonder whether they were no longer safe even when participating in simple, everyday activities.

Targeted violence and terrorism have not only rattled the sense of security commonly felt in our republic, but they also inflict lasting harm upon everyone directly and indirectly impacted. Too many families have buried loved ones. Too

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many first responders have arrived at scenes of unimaginable devastation, and are forced to live with those images for the rest of their lives. The National Center for PTSD at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that 28 percent of people who witness terrorism, targeted violence, and other mass shootings develop post-traumatic stress disorder, while another third will have acute stress disorders that require lengthy and sometimes intensive treatments.⁴

At the Department of Homeland Security, I lead the Office of Counterterrorism and Threat Prevention. My team develops and coordinates policies for some of the most important security mission areas, including the screening and vetting of arrivals to the United States, the dismantling of transnational criminal enterprises, countering unmanned aerial systems (UAS), and the countering of foreign influence on society and politics. My office acts as a force multiplier for DHS's 240,000 employees. We tackle large problems by bringing the skills, resources, and authorities of dozens of offices and components to bear on specific problem sets. My office also ensures that DHS meets the baseline requirements of state, local, tribal, and territorial (SLTT) partners in the broader homeland security enterprise. These partners serve as the foundation of a whole-of-society response to these threats.

Of particular concern for us are the problems of terrorism and targeted violence. For the past year, my office has worked with diligence, determination, and rapidity not typically associated with large bureaucracies to craft a new approach to addressing terrorism and targeted violence. We documented this approach in DHS's *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence*, released publicly this past September.⁵ The *Strategic Framework* updates traditional counterterrorism tools so as to better address the new threat environment, and it recalibrates the Department's prevention and protection missions. We have secured new budget resources to expand these missions, have retooled the office structures implementing these missions, and are currently in the final stages of producing a corresponding implementation plan that documents how these missions will expand, and what they are designed to accomplish, in the years to come. We are proud of all the work we have done to address the domestic threat, but I believe it's necessary to explicitly state that there remain problems beyond our reach, where Congress in particular can play a vital role. I will outline this role—and, in particular, advocate for the creation of a bipartisan commission akin to the one that helped guide this country's security policies in the immediate wake of the 9/11 attacks—at the conclusion of this statement.

I know many readers will be unfamiliar with the department's approach to countering terrorism and targeted violence, and how we are adjusting our toolkit to deal with the evolving threats. Thus, I will focus in this statement on the department's new strategy that my office worked to build, and how it addresses

all forms of terrorism and targeted violence. I hope that my explanation of the strategy's principles, and the specific programs that it establishes or advances, can build a deeper appreciation of the thinking that guides our work, and what our efforts will mean in practice for advancing the safety of the American public.

DHS'S STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR COUNTERING TERRORISM AND TARGETED VIOLENCE

The backdrop that I just described of a broader and more complex threat spurred the department to release its *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence* in September. The strategy clearly describes an evolving threat landscape that is no longer dominated solely by the challenges that foreign terrorist organizations pose. The *Strategic Framework* highlights domestic terrorism, and the need for the department to “amplify its focus on the growing domestic challenge.”⁶ Yet it is the inclusion of targeted violence alongside terrorism that serves as a clear break from prior strategies. As DHS's then acting secretary, Kevin McAleenan, wrote in his introduction to the *Strategic Framework*: “The Federal Government has been moving toward recognizing terrorism and targeted violence as intertwined and interrelated for the first time, but this is the first nationallevel strategy to explicitly state that terrorism and targeted violence overlap, intersect, and interact as problems, and that they necessitate a shared set of solutions.”⁷

Indeed, the *Strategic Framework* recognizes that DHS had to expand on its traditional counterterrorism measures, such as countering terrorist travel through the screening and vetting of travelers to the United States to eliminate terrorist travel. The *Strategic Framework*'s first two goals outline how DHS will continue to invest in the programs and efforts that have been so successful at preventing foreign terrorist attacks against the nation over the past seventeen years. But the *Strategic Framework* also clearly explains that mobilization to violence occurs at the local level. As I have said, an exclusive focus on the threat posed by foreign terrorist organizations will fail to apprehend the current threat landscape. Thus, the *Strategic Framework* uses Goals 3 and 4 to identify how the department will support SLTT efforts to identify signs of mobilization to terrorism and targeted violence, to “off-ramp” susceptible individuals before they strike and strengthen the preparedness and protection of the most vulnerable communities.

I noted my office's current work on an implementation plan for the *Strategic Framework*, which is designed to document the efforts needed to meet the Framework's goals. The implementation plan designates lead offices and

supporting roles for each priority action in the Framework and sets specific milestones that each of these lead offices will need to achieve. This process will allow the implementation plan to serve as the basis for the department's counterterrorism budget requests for years to come. Further, a public version of the implementation plan will be forthcoming to ensure that we at the department remain accountable to the American public. The *Strategic Framework* was not an end unto itself but rather the outline upon which the implementation plan and its supporting budgets will forge the department's approach to addressing current and future challenges of terrorism and targeted violence.

WORKING FROM THE OUTSIDE IN: THE DEPARTMENT'S COUNTERTERRORISM MISSION

“Foreign adversaries remain committed to attacking the American homeland. DHS thus seeks to push out the country’s borders as far as possible in order to increase the lead time we have to intercept terrorists and mechanisms designed to support and advance their cause.”

Before I explain how the department is updating and expanding its more traditional counterterrorism roles, I would like to examine the threat posed by foreign terrorist organizations in more depth. Foreign adversaries remain committed to attacking the American homeland. DHS thus seeks to push out the country's borders as far as possible in order to increase the lead time we have to intercept terrorists and mechanisms designed to support and advance their cause. Foreign terrorist orga-

nizations like al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Hezbollah remain persistent challenges:

- Al-Qaeda has suffered significant losses in its leadership ranks through years of counterterrorism pressure, but the group continues to wage insurgencies, recruit from local populations, and target Western interests in the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, and beyond.
- ISIS branches and offshoots have popped up across the globe. Those who identify with its hateful ideology are trying to establish footholds under the ISIS flag.
- The ideology espoused by groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS also manifests itself in attacks by homegrown violent extremists, who often find their inspiration online.

- Iran continues to support various terrorist organizations, including Hezbollah, which has established sophisticated networks all over the world, including in the United States. These branches conduct a wide range of illicit activities, which in turn help fund terrorism and other strategic activities.

A critical part of the Department of Homeland Security's mission has always been, and will continue to be, ensuring that terrorism does not visit our shores again from abroad.

One major way DHS does this, as outlined in Goal 2 of the *Strategic Framework*, is preventing terrorists and other hostile actors from entering the United States in the first place. For DHS, this effort begins by trying to ensure that our global transportation and trade networks are neither the victim nor the transit for terrorists and other hostile actors. One example of our evolution in this space is the 2018 establishment of the National Vetting Center (NVC), which centralized and accelerated the department's review of applications for travel and immigration. NVC allows national security partner reviews to take place prior to the issuance of a travel document. Prior to the NVC's establishment, national security vetting results could be delivered *after* adjudications had been made, meaning that there were times when we found derogatory information on individuals who had already traveled to the United States. Further, NVC's common technology platform and process allow for a coordinated and comprehensive review of sensitive information, streamlining how unclassified applicant data is shared with national-security partners and ensuring that the results of reviews of sensitive information are quickly shared with adjudicators. The NVC thus creates a more proactive and comprehensive capability than watch lists in screening online applications for those wishing to enter the U.S. through the Visa Waiver Program.

I mentioned that the department prioritizes pushing the United States' borders out. The department recognizes that building the capacity of international partners to investigate and interdict terrorism abroad strengthens our own national security. DHS is making significant investments in improving security sector assistance programs, in coordination and partnership with the Department of State. The department is also relying on the numerous lessons we have learned over the past sixteen years to provide international standards for counterterrorism that our partners can adopt.

DHS plans to create a program office to manage the department's efforts to counter illicit travel through information sharing with foreign governments, and to review how well foreign partnerships contribute to stymying terrorist and criminal travel. DHS has a basic responsibility to determine whether prospective travelers are who they claim to be and whether they pose a public safety risk. To

date, that process has remained far too analog in a digital age, focused on such paperwork as passports, rather than incorporating readily accessible details about individuals' history. The program office will, among other efforts, expand the department's international biometric interoperability programs with Visa Waiver Program, Western Hemisphere, and other priority countries; and develop a consistent policy and legal framework for how DHS shares information with foreign governments. Within its first year of operations, the program office will expand the number of partner countries with biometric interoperability solutions with DHS, and will ensure that all DHS international engagements on information sharing are appropriately prioritized and coordinated.

All these efforts are designed to improve DHS's counterterrorism mission. At times, however, the U.S. government needs to take more drastic steps. In 2017, through Executive Order 13780, President Trump determined that foreign governments must meet minimum, baseline standards of identity management and information sharing for their citizens to be eligible to travel to the United States. These standards are based on international legal obligations and best practices, and requiring that other countries satisfy them helps to ensure that we can confirm travelers' identity and assess the likelihood that they pose a threat to public safety. Most countries meet these requirements, but a few do not. The president thus issued restrictions on entry from certain foreign nationals in Proclamations 9645 and 9983. These restrictions have been tailored to reflect the risks posed to U.S. security, as well as our assessment of how likely foreign governments are to make improvements. DHS is working with willing governments whose citizens face travel restrictions to improve their identity management and information sharing practices to a level where routine travel can resume.

WORKING FROM THE INSIDE: THE DEPARTMENT'S NEW PREVENTION AND PROTECTION MISSIONS

The *Strategic Framework* reflects DHS's determination to expand prevention efforts at the local level in order to reduce the draw of terrorism and targeted violence. DHS is rapidly establishing and expanding prevention efforts to offer individuals alternatives to the path to violence. Prevention can stop violence before it occurs. It can provide help to individuals before they become violent criminals. Prevention works hand in hand with protection. Even the most robust efforts to prevent individuals from committing violence will never reduce incidents of terrorism or targeted violence to zero. Thus, when attacks do occur, it is vital that

potential targets are prepared and protected, in order to reduce the harm that can be done.

To accomplish its prevention and protection missions, DHS needs to act in a coordinated manner. Often this is described as a whole-of-government approach, wherein all elements of state power are brought to bear on a problem in a coordinated way. While multiple DHS offices and components need to work with interagency partners for the department's prevention and protection missions to succeed, this is not the foundation or lynchpin for success. *DHS fundamentally understands that the scale and complexity of the terrorism and targeted violence problem set dictate that the federal government cannot prevent every attack nor protect every citizen on its own.* Rather than a whole-of-government approach, a whole-of-society approach is needed. Every locality should build relationships of trust among key stakeholders, including law enforcement, government agencies, civic organizations, houses of worship, private businesses, and others that will empower rapid and effective information sharing and threat assessments.

For example, the *Strategic Framework* highlights the problems of terrorists being able to reach and catalyze new audiences online, and of the spread of grievances designed to spur acts of targeted violence. The *Framework* clearly discusses the need to build resilience to malign information operations initiated by foreign states and non-state actors that directly or indirectly work to enhance the pernicious impact of targeted violence and terrorism. DHS works to accomplish this in part through continued engagement with such mechanisms as the Global Internet Forum for Counterterrorism and the evolving frameworks found in the Aqaba Process and the Christchurch Call to Action. Yet DHS also supports efforts by individual technology companies, non-governmental organizations, and civic partners to halt the spread of dangerous hate speech and violent extremist ideologies online. Mechanisms like the Digital Forum for Terrorism Prevention and new and expanded digital challenges are designed to turn the tools terrorists and others use for malicious purposes back on them.

Federal prevention efforts have confronted well-documented budget and resource challenges. Yet the future looks bright for the expansion of locally based prevention efforts. The most recent DHS budget tripled the size of the department's prevention budget. This budget will expand field-deployed regional coordinators to cover the country, and it will reestablish a grant program. The

“Prevention works hand in hand with protection. Even the most robust efforts to prevent individuals from committing violence will never reduce incidents of terrorism or targeted violence to zero.”

FY20 budget will build a solid foundation upon which to implement the vision for prevention outlined in the *Strategic Framework*. It will be critical to ensure that all DHS offices and components can contribute to a harmonized effort to expand prevention and protection efforts.

The president's FY2021 budget further strengthens DHS's prevention and protection missions. The president's FY2021 budget will allow DHS to bring its prevention mission to scale. It resources department efforts to provide technical assistance, training, and grants to SLTT partners and civil society to enable them to implement local prevention frameworks. The FY2021 budget enhances DHS's protection mission by expanding the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency's (CISA's) field forces, in order to reduce the potential harm that might come to victims of targeted violence and terrorism. The budgetary expansion will also harmonize DHS's prevention efforts with similar efforts underway at the Department of Justice, which is working to implement its Disruption and Early Engagement Program (DEEP) model. That model assesses the degree of threat posed by particular subjects and develops options to mitigate threats and divert or disrupt mobilization to violence.

PREVENTION

The centrality of prevention to DHS's new *Strategic Framework* can be discerned by the fact that the entirety of the *Framework's* third goal is a call to develop societal resistance to radicalization to violent extremism and mobilization to violence, and to ensure broad awareness of these threats. The *Framework* also commits DHS to working to develop and sustain locally based prevention frameworks that work to "off-ramp" individuals before they commit acts of terrorism or targeted violence.

Prevention has been effective at addressing all forms of terrorism and targeted violence. Peer-reviewed research continues to confirm that individuals engaging in terrorism and targeted violence adhere to various ideologies and grievances, and increasingly are driven by a combination of both. These same studies confirm that, regardless of the grievance, we can prevent this violence before it happens using locally based frameworks and programs. There is no single pathway through which terrorists and others come to embrace the use of violence, but the factors driving them are consistently observed by those who know these individuals best. Families, friends, and others who care for the well-being of these individuals are critical to prevention. They are often the ones who recognize that an individual needs help.

So, as I said, the threat we face requires a whole-of-society prevention solution. We need one that builds meaningful and trusting partnerships among many different actors in our local communities, and that provides them with resources, personnel, training, and other assistance to act when someone is in need. A good deal of this work is underway already. For example, the state of Colorado has a robust prevention program. Initially established to address terrorism, this program has broadened to include targeted violence prevention, primarily by incorporating existing school safety programs. Using grants and a field-deployed regional prevention coordinator, DHS supported state and local prevention programs that in the past three years have intervened in forty cases where targeted violence and terrorism were underlying concerns. Thirty-five of these forty cases were linked to domestic-terrorism-related ideologies.

In April 2019, Acting Secretary McAleenan created the Office of Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention (OTVTP) and directed that it be the primary entity responsible for driving and coordinating the department's prevention mission. OTVTP looks across the department to identify complementary efforts that can be amplified, prevent duplication, and address gaps through the creation and deployment of prevention programs supporting SLTT efforts. These programs include awareness briefings that provide effective ways to identify individuals who might mobilize to violence, Digital Forums on Terrorism Prevention that connect experts in technology firms to community stakeholders and build lasting partnerships, and the placement of regional coordinators across the country to catalyze and expand locally based prevention efforts.

Let me put a finer point on this. Between 2017 and 2019, the department ran a dedicated grant program that supported twenty-five distinct prevention programs across the country. These grant-funded projects have allowed DHS to evaluate promising best practices and innovations in the prevention space throughout the country. The programs that grantees enacted reached 42,000 participants, and over four million people viewed grantee-generated content online. As a result of these grant projects, four states adopted statewide strategies to prevent targeted violence, and seven cities are establishing regional resilience frameworks. The grant program resulted in six models of prevention programs that SLTT partners can employ. As I mentioned earlier, we are now relaunching the grant program. This prevention grant program will help build local prevention capacity across the country.

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PROTECTION

But everyone acknowledges that even the most robust prevention and law enforcement efforts will, at times, fail to stop individuals from mobilizing to violence. Protection is therefore the *Strategic Framework's* fourth goal, and it remains critical to our counterterrorism efforts. Prevention and protection efforts complement one another to help to reduce the loss of life and increase the difficulty of carrying out an attack. Protection enhances the disincentive for conducting the attack in the first place.

On the protection side, DHS continues longstanding work with communities to share threat information, harden soft targets, train law enforcement and first responders, and conduct active shooter exercises and trainings. These are proven initiatives since DHS's creation that improve safety and security in communities, and DHS is re-focusing these efforts based on emerging threat indicators.

An example of this is CISA's Soft Targets and Crowded Places Task Force. The Task Force provides training, information sharing, security assessments, and other tools to the private sector to protect against acts of terrorism of all ideologies. This is amplified through CISA's Protective Security Advisor (PSA) program. Since the

“Following the tragic attack at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, members credited the training coordinated by the local Protective Security Advisor with saving lives.”

program's inception in 2011, nearly 40,000 participants from security and human resource disciplines have participated in workshops. Following the tragic attack at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, members of the synagogue credited the training coordinated by the local [Protective Security Advisor] with saving lives. The Federal Protective Service, which pro-

protects over 9,300 federally owned or leased facilities in the U.S., has trained over 100,000 members of the federal workforce on how to respond to an active threat in the building where they work.

Protection remains front of mind for DHS, which is why the *Strategic Framework* calls for more effort to be placed on both prevention and protection together. The December 2017 report from the Homeland Security Advisory Council titled *Preventing Targeted Violence Against Faith-Based Communities* validated much of this approach and urged DHS to do more in the prevention and protection space. DHS is folding these recommendations into the implementation plan for the *Strategic Framework*, and both documents will continue to guide the expansion of prevention and protection efforts across the United States.

MOVING FORWARD: MEETING AND OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

In spite of these advancements in counterterrorism, prevention, and protection, real challenges face DHS and others when addressing terrorism and targeted violence. One challenge is how online platforms catalyze the spread of hate speech, radicalizing grievances and normalization of targeted violence. In testimony before the House Homeland Security Committee in January 2020, Paul Goldenberg summarized this well when he discussed the depth and breadth of targeted hate speech against the small Jewish community of Whitefish, Montana. What is striking in his testimony is not just the depravity of numerous online figures targeting a Jewish community, and not even the added depravity of targeting specific leaders and members of the community—it was the ultimate depravity of targeting the children of that Jewish community. While the First Amendment might protect those openly supporting neo-Nazis or white supremacy, a frequent question those targeted by such hate ask is why law enforcement at the local, state, and federal level feel hamstrung to act when specific individuals are targeted online.

“Paul Goldenberg summarized [the problem posed by online platforms] well when he discussed the depth and breadth of targeted hate speech against the small Jewish community of Whitefish, Montana.”

The truth is the federal government has a history of regulating certain forms of speech. For example, the Federal Communications Commission adjudicates numerous complaints concerning obscene, indecent, and profane broadcasts over terrestrial radio and broadcast television.⁸ So while it is beyond the remit of DHS to tackle this alone, more must be done to take a fresh look at how the First Amendment applies to hate speech online. Some activity on this is already underway. For example, Congress has introduced numerous pieces of legislation examining Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act that separates technology platforms from the users who use them to generate content. The legislation, as well as a February public workshop that the Department of Justice hosted to examine this issue, is revisiting this separation between hosts and users to examine, among other issues, the use of these platforms for spreading hate speech and fostering terrorism and targeted violence.⁹

The second issue is the question of designating domestic terror groups or movements, much as we use existing authorities to designate FTOs. Several witnesses from non-governmental organizations who testified recently on the

rise of anti-Semitism in the United States supported the concept of designation for domestic terrorism.¹⁰ Jonathan Greenblatt of the Anti-Defamation League noted in his written statement that the U.S. government should “examine whether certain white supremacist groups operating abroad meet the specific criteria to be subject to sanctions under its designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (PTO) authority.”¹¹

Designation is an intriguing concept that deserves serious study. When the U.S. government designates a foreign terrorist organization, it uses a careful process that includes several required elements—including past acts of violence against Americans and/or their property. But designation raises a number of thorny issues that require careful consideration. For example, consider these questions:

- If Congress authorized the designation of domestic terrorism, what would those requirements be for designating domestic terrorist movements?
- Who would have responsibility for running the process of designation?
- And how do we ensure that we don’t repeat mistakes of our past?

We need to be honest—that our history is rich with examples of abusing our

“Our history is rich with examples of abusing our authorities when we are fearful of being attacked. The internment of Japanese Americans during WWII and the campaigns associated with McCarthyism are but two of these shameful episodes.”

authorities when we are fearful of being attacked. The internment of Japanese Americans during WWII and the campaigns associated with McCarthyism are but two of these shameful episodes. Indeed, much of our national security apparatus today operates under policies developed as a result of the Church Committee’s investigations into domestic abuses of authority. Careful consideration of these issues now would go a long way to avoiding abuses of authority.

CONCLUSION

These are significant challenges and questions that need to be addressed with numerous constitutional, ethical and political considerations. The executive branch is not necessarily best left to answer or address these issues on its own, but they need answers and fast.

For this reason, it is my hope that Congress will consider taking a serious look at how we take the next steps. We have done this before in our history. After 9/11, a bipartisan commission provided chapters of actionable recommendations that Congress and the executive branch implemented. In some respects, the challenges that we face today are more complicated than after 9/11. Designating FTOs, extending our borders, and preventing bad actors from reaching the U.S. took a lot of work, but these were clearly the actions we needed to take to share information better and implement enhanced security measures. But today, the traditional intelligence collection and law enforcement operations do not lend themselves to serving as solutions, and adversaries in this space understand how to use their constitutionally protected activities to straddle the line but not cross it.

I think we are at a moment in time when these questions deserve a serious, respectful study— before we have another mass attack attributed to domestic terror movements.

NOTES

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