



Strategy Session on Non-Kinetic Counterterrorism Tools: Opening Remarks

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Good afternoon and welcome to today’s Washington Institute Strategy Session on non-kinetic counterterrorism tools. At a time of growing partisan polarization, the need to rationalize U.S. investment in counterterrorism represents a rare area of bipartisan agreement. As the Biden administration’s *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* put it, “we will make smart and disciplined choices regarding our national defense and the responsible use of our military, while elevating diplomacy as our tool of first resort.”¹ The interim strategy document goes on to note the need to “meet the challenges not only from great powers and regional adversaries, but also violent and criminal non-state actors and extremists,” among other threats from climate change to infectious disease and more.² This follows the Trump administration’s 2018 National Defense Strategy, which made its position crystal clear: “Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.”³

Competing priorities and cost were big reasons for this shift; national fatigue over long-term and open-ended foreign military deployments is another. But the fact is that a wholesale review of America’s counterterrorism posture is long overdue for another reason: it has been highly successful in some ways, and woefully unsuccessful in others.

Seen through the tactical prism of disrupting and foiling terrorist financing, logistics, and attacks, the U.S. counterterrorism bureaucracy has been remarkably effective these past twenty years. As someone who worked on the FBI’s 9/11 investigation, code-named PENTTBOM, I assure you that it would have blown my mind at the time to know that the United States would not suffer another spectacular, organized terrorist attack over the next twenty years.

And yet, for all our *tactical* success, U.S. counterterrorism efforts earn failing grades at a strategic level given that there are far more people today radicalized to violent extremism than in 2001, representing a more diversified and globally dispersed terrorist threat.

By investing so many resources into the tactical counterterrorism mission over two decades, the United States built up the capability to run a highly efficient and effective rate of operations and other counterterrorism functions. But the inherent tradeoff was that all those dollars, intelligence resources, and more went to support

¹ White House, “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance,” March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

² White House, “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance,” March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

³ U.S. Department of Defense, “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge,” 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

primarily kinetic missions. Thus, two factors—widening the national security aperture to address other priority threats, and making the counterterrorism mission more sustainable over the long term—now underlie the need to rationalize counterterrorism efforts.

As it happens, turning the corner on counterterrorism will require less investment in expensive hard, military power and much more investment in more affordable soft power, including intelligence forecasting, multilateral diplomacy, civilian capacity building, conflict prevention and stabilization, and anti-corruption.⁴ This shift will entail a period of rebalancing, along with a transition period of burden shifting among partners and allies. Tellingly, U.S. military commanders were among the first to recognize this need. In 2013, then U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) commander Gen. James Mattis stated, “The more that we put into the State Department’s diplomacy, hopefully the less we have to put into a military budget as we deal with the outcome of an apparent American withdrawal from the international scene.”⁵

We are long overdue for discussions like the one we are holding today aimed at operationalizing this shift away from only dealing with the crisis of the day and focusing more on doing things today to prevent tomorrow’s even bigger crises. Nearly a decade ago, as the crisis in Syria was still in its early stages in 2012, the U.S. intelligence community produced *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds*, the National Intelligence Council’s periodic unclassified report aimed at providing a framework for thinking about the future and intended to “stimulate strategic thinking by identifying critical trends and potential discontinuities.” At the time, the NIC warned of a series of disturbing trends—refugee migrations and displacements, regional conflicts, chronic instability and weak states-- that together created a set of “looming disequilibria.”⁶

In 2012 testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations committee, I underscored these issues in the context of the Syrian war:

I submit that the United States is not doing anywhere near enough to address these critical problems. Failure to respond effectively to this crisis has led to tangible and horrific consequences today. Failure to quickly reassess our policies and roll out a far more pro-active stance toward both the humanitarian crisis and the conflict itself will have equally damaging and painful consequences tomorrow.⁷

Fast forward to today and the NIC’s recently released *Global Trends 2040: A More Contested World*, which painfully underscores in stark terms the need for a significant increase in U.S. and allied investment in crisis management and prevention.

Global Trends 2040 underscores a series of “structural drivers” underlying the report’s broader forecast—including demographic and human development challenges; economic strains; technology shifts; climate change and environmental degradation; and public health crises like global pandemics—that are all already reshaping the world. Of course, “the COVID-19 pandemic has inserted greater uncertainty and volatility into these short-term forecasts.”⁸

Every four years the Washington Institute produces a series of Presidential Transition policy papers with advice

⁴ Katherine Zimmerman, *Beyond Terrorism: Defeating the Salafi-Jihadi Movement* (American Enterprise Institute, October 2019), <http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Beyond-Counterterrorism.pdf?x88519>.

⁵ Zach Silberman, “The Military Understands Smart Power,” U.S. Global Leadership Coalition, March 8, 2013, <https://www.usglc.org/blog/the-military-understands-smart-power/>.

⁶ National Intelligence Council, “Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds,” Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2012, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/who-we-are/organizations/mission-integration/nic/nic-related-menu/nic-related-content/global-trends-2030>

⁷ Matthew Levitt, “The Growing Threat of Terrorism and Sectarianism in the Middle East,” Testimony submitted to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, March 6, 2014, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/download/matthew-levitt>

⁸ National Intelligence Council, “Global Trends 2040: A More Contested World,” Office of the Director of National Intelligence, March 2021, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/gt2040-home>

on a broad array of issues facing the incoming administration. In March, The Washington Institute published my contribution to this series, [*Rethinking U.S. Efforts on Counterterrorism: Toward a Sustainable Plan Two Decades after 9/11*](#). The paper addresses a range of complicated issues, from the need to disentangle intelligence counterterrorism budgets from kinetic military budgets to the need to rebuild international alliances to address a range of transnational threats, including terrorism and violent extremism.

But among the study's most important recommendations are the need to invest in diplomacy, civilian capacity building, terrorism prevention, and efforts to address global fragility. Today's strategy session is intended to delve deeper into these issues by looking back at the civilian counterterrorism tools the United States has developed over the past twenty years and asking what has worked and what can be employed, or expanded upon, to fit America's emerging counterterrorism posture. To focus the discussion, we have organized our panel discussions around three sets of tools: (1) building civilian counterterrorism capacity; (2) focusing on prevention and addressing global fragility; and (3) countering terrorism financing and corruption.

The United States will not be able to tackle these global problems alone, so it is fitting that we will open today's strategy session with remarks from Ilkka Salmi, the new EU Counterterrorism Coordinator. Over the course of the day, we will hear from U.S. officials from the Departments of State, Justice, Treasury, and Homeland Security, as well as the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the National Counterterrorism Center, and the National Security Council. Our discussions will be held under strict Chatham House Rule, though most speakers have submitted on-the-record statements that will be made public.

A great many people helped make today's event possible, including today's speakers and their staffs and a tremendous crew of Washington Institute professionals to whom I am very grateful. Special thanks go to Lauren Fredericks, who worked tirelessly to make this event possible.

Thank you all for joining us today, let the brainstorming begin.