A Survey of the 2023 Terrorism Threat Landscape

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Matthew Levitt: Welcome everybody to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. I'm Matt Levitt and I direct the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence here at the Institute, where I'm also the Fromer-Wexler Fellow. And I am thrilled to be here with Christie Abizaid, who is the Director of the National Counterterrorism Center here in the Washington area. Christie was sworn in to be the Director of NCTC in June 2021, but she's kind of been there and done that for about two decades beforehand at the Defense Department, at the Defense Intelligence Agency, and a whole lot of other places in between.

So, Christie, thank you so much for taking the time to sit here with me and engage in a little fireside chat about what the threat landscape looks like for counterterrorism, looking at 2023. And before we start, I just want to thank both your staff and the Washington Institute staff who made this possible. So, thank you all very, very much.

We're going to engage in a little bit of a chat, and then we'll open it up to Q&A. Those of you who are participating via the zoom link will be able to submit questions directly via the Q&A function in the bottom middle of your screen. Anybody who's joining us on YouTube will be able to submit questions via email to the email address policyforum@washingtoninstitute.org. That's policyforum@washingtoninstitute.org and we'll get to as many of your questions as time permits.

So, let's jump right into it. Let's start by just kind of scoping out the geographically and ideologically diversified and transnational and—to steal a word that I saw you use in a Congressional hearing—the unpredictable threat environment both here home in the United States and abroad.

Christine Abizaid: Okay, great. Well, first, before we dive right in. Let me just say thank you very much for the invitation. But, also, thanks for the work of the Washington Institute. You guys do really good work. It's very thought provoking. It's really helpful from a policy context, much less just sort of an explanation of the world as it exists. So, thank you for your own contribution to the CT community over time. And thanks for the invitation here. It's really great to be here.

Okay, yes. So, we have a diverse, geographically dispersed and a highly unpredictable threat environment. Now, in the homeland, it's a threat environment that I was actually shocked as an intelligence community leader

coming back into the CT community that we could describe as less acute here in the homeland than at any time since 9/11. Yeah, that was true in 2021 when I came back. It remains true here now and I think that's a real credit to what has been an amazing and persistent campaign of pressure against our terrorist adversaries over the last 20 plus years since 9/11.

But the threat is unpredictable. And when you look at it, let's just start here in the homeland. It's characterized as most likely to occur in the United States from lone actors. Now, lone actors motivated by a range of ideologies. We have lone actors that are motivated and inspired by ISIS, inspired by al-Qaeda. There are lone actors that are inspired by ideologies that are more domestically bound. Racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism is certainly on the rise, and we see different aspects of the threat manifest here in the United States. And so, this lone actor threat, because it is highly individualized, because the way that an individual chooses to turn to violence can be subject to just so many very personal circumstances. There's not a large network to attach them to, to be able to do the intelligence and law enforcement work to uncover the big plot. It can be very unpredictable.

And I would say, I've testified several times with Director Wray, and we've had lots of conversations about the nature of the threat here in the homeland, and it is a real law enforcement challenge. It's a real challenge for CT professionals not only here in this country, but also increasingly in other parts of the Western world. We see it in Europe and elsewhere.

And so, even as we deal with that challenge which can be considered (1) unpredictable, but also oftentimes less sophisticated. We have still got to be really vigilant about the threat posed by those organizations that are based overseas that want to conduct attacks against Americans here in the homeland. And that's principally, an al-Qaeda and an ISIS threat. Those two threats, even after the years post 9/11, even after the sustained pressure, those threats still exist. And it's incumbent upon us as a CT community to stay laser focused on those threats and make sure that we have a counterterrorism effort here in the homeland, a targeted counterterrorism effort internationally, one that builds on partnerships that make sure that we're able to manage that threat.

Levitt: So, we're sitting here in Washington, DC. So, I have to ask, you know, barely a week goes by without another arrest here in the United States, related either to someone that's inspired by ISIS or al-Qaeda; someone who wanted to go to fight abroad, or did in fact go; the home-grown violent extremist kind of lone actually you've described. But, also, the domestic violent extremists. The HVEs and the DVEs, militias, anti-government groups, anarchists, white supremacists. Of all the things that keep you up at night—I'm sure there is one or two—what do you feel is the main most pressing terrorist threat here in the United States right now?

Abizaid: Well, I mean if you look at it by the numbers, you know, by the numbers the most likely terrorist attack inside the United States is going to be by an individual that is inspired to act based on racial or ethnic motivations, largely driven by a belief in the superiority of the white race. That's where we've seen it manifest. We saw that as recently in Buffalo in May. We've seen it in El Paso prior. But when you look at sort of the numbers of casualties associated with the domestic violent extremist threat overall this aspect of it that is defined by racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism that's what we're experiencing in this country.

But we're not only experiencing that in this country. You know, again, the Al-Qaeda and ISIS inspired threat is still there. We have had attacks by individuals. We've had disruptions here in the country of individuals that continue to be, you know, continue to consume propaganda by those organizations that is produced overseas, but very slick and English language, and it's continuing to inspire individuals to act here, in the United States. And so, you know, between the kind of racially, ethnically motivated violent extremist threat, the homegrown violent extremist threat that's tied to foreign terrorist organizations. Those are the those are the ones that are again most likely to occur and often with sort of a lower degree of sophistication than we have been concerned about from kind of this hierarchically directed al-Qaeda or ISIS sort of transnational plotting.

But I caution a little bit as true as that is, as the lone actor threat is really most manifest here in the US as the threat we're concerned about. You know, the pressure that you need to maintain on the Al-Qaeda and ISIS networks that still want to attack in the United States is absolutely necessary, because, you know, a networked organization that has sophisticated means of attacking innocent civilians is still something we've got to be concerned about. We've got to be prepared for, and we need to appropriately again organize ourselves as the United States government, not in the way that we did on the twelfth of September 2001, but organize ourselves effectively based on the lessons learned over the last, you know, 20 plus years so we're managing what is a dynamic threat environment.

Levitt: I was at the FBI on the twelfth of September, and I can tell you, you know, it's amazing to see what we have achieved in the time since. We'll come back to that in a minute, and we're going to get to delve into the ISIS and Al-Qaeda in one second. But first, I just want to ask, when it comes to the racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists to the REMVE side of it, which for us is primarily a domestic issue, can you speak to us a little bit about what NCTC's role is in that particular problem set. And how transnational is it beyond kind of shared ideologies and shared manifestos?

Abizaid: So, thank you for that question because I actually think it's a really important part of the evolution of the threat environment that we at NCTC need to keep pace with.

So, first of all, in the realm of domestic violent extremism, purely domestic counterterrorism, NCTC has an important but a supporting role to play right; FBI, DHS, they are the main federal agencies that are going to protect the homeland and investigate and disrupt the kind of that kind of threat that's here in the US. Where we come into play at NCTC is understanding the foreign nexus associated with any threat to homeland again, whether foreign terrorist inspired, or whether motivated by another ideology.

And I would say that I'd characterize among the domestic violent extremist threats that we have in the country the one that presents the most evidence of a foreign nexus is the racially and ethnically motivated violent extremist threat. Now some of this is about online collectives that are transnational in nature. Some of this is about, you know, individuals who are inspired by acts in the US that then go conduct attacks in their home countries. You look at the influence of something like the Christchurch attack, and how that has been repeated by so many US domestic violent extremists, but also other international, violent extremists.

It is just this truly transnational problem that we, as an international community of counterterrorism professionals need to convene on, need to engage on, need to understand what's happening in our individual domestic environments to be able to learn from each other. Whether it's our Five Eyes counterparts, whether it's our European counterparts, we're seeing aspects of it in South America. It is truly transnational not just in the individual connectivity, not just in kind of manifestos and ideologies, but in a way that all of us are experiencing different aspects of it, and can learn from it, I think, in really important ways.

Levitt: And just one more question about NCTC's role in these things before we get into the kind of international bit a little more detail. But that is, can you explain for us what NCTC's role is in efforts to disrupt terrorist travel and secure the border, which I'm sure is another component, not only in the REMVE but more broadly.

Abizaid: Sure, absolutely. So, NCTC was created to be the knowledge repository for the United States government for all terrorism information. That has included and very specifically mandated around our knowledge repository on known and suspected terrorists. We, you know, take all information from US government holdings and understand who, from an identities perspective, is a potential threat to the homeland, and we support the operational agencies with border security missions, with other intelligence operations missions to make sure that that information is part of the system that screens and vets individuals who are trying to come to the country and then we can protect against that.

When there are encounters on the borders of individuals that have been watch listed, that's, you know, work that we will do behind the scenes with our operational partners to understand whether there is a true threat at hand, and how we, as a CT community, as traditionally collaborative, highly engaged, what we, as the CT community, should do about it. So, it's actually a really big piece of the NCTC mission that I'm really proud to see in action every day.

Levitt: Okay, so kind of the elephant in the room, I think, is Islamic State. They experienced territorial defeat in 2018, and they've lost, I don't know, it's got to be at least a dozen senior leaders, including actual leaders of the organization over the past few years. So, kind of consecutive one-two punches. But yet the group still appears to present serious global threats both to the United States and Western interests and to our allies around the world. So, how do you see the current state of play regarding the terrorist threat posed specifically by ISIS, by Islamic State.

Abizaid: So, I mean, look I think you've described accurately sort of what's happening, especially in Iraq and Syria with the Islamic State. You know, like just in the last year you've seen the removal of the last two ISIS emirs in Syria. One based on a very effective US raid conducted by the Department of Defense, but another just from local dynamics that you know, really was a signal of the kind of pressure that is multi-vector that they are dealing with in Syria, and also, you know, in Iraq. We've got really good partnerships with Syrian Democratic forces, with Iraqi security forces. If you talk to Erik Kurilla, you know you look at the stats that they have been able to put up against ISIS in Syria, in Iraq over the last year, and it's over 300 operations that have had a significant impact that has kept this threat at bay.

And yet, we see ISIS' expansion across the African continent. We see concerning indications of ISIS Khorasan in Afghanistan and its ambition that might go beyond that immediate territory.

And so, even as there's been an amazing effort and a coalition effort to contain the ISIS core threat in the theater, where it had for a short time gained territory, this expansion, this brand expansion of the ISIS threat is really concerning. And from an intelligence perspective, it's a really important challenge for us to understand; not just where the expansion is happening, what is driving the expansion, but also, when does that expansion change appreciably change the threat to the West appreciably change the threat to the United States in a way that we're at an inflection point and must get ahead of it before it comes at us again. And so, you know, ISIS is actually a very kind of dynamic group that continues to be led from this core in Iraq and Syria, continues to have interest in not just their sort of territorial integrity, but in the notoriety and the brand expansion and the attacks against the West. And so, we've got to remain vigilant against it.

Levitt: So, we're going to talk in a little bit about the implications of this kind of shift in our counterterrorism posture 20 years after 9/11. But just on the issue of ISIS, the two regions that you mentioned, or two of them Afghanistan and Africa, are places where we haven't, either in Africa haven't traditionally been big feet on the ground, and in Afghanistan used to be, but are not anymore. So, in an era where indicators and warning are what it's all about, how well positioned are we to be able to have those tools in place to know in advance when a group is shifting from regional attacks to international or specifically counter US attacks when they're operating in places like Afghanistan and Africa?

Abizaid: I mean, look, I think that's the challenge that we are dealing with in this transition environment that we're in in the CT community. Right? Resources are shifting away, and I think rightly so, for good reason, given all the other national security priorities that we have. And the challenge for the CT enterprise is going to be, how are we going to be able to stay front footed to understand when this latest manifestation of the threat is a threat to the United States, is a threat to our partners and our allies? And how are we going to keep the right set of tools available to be able to deal with it and leverage whatever tool is most appropriate in the moment to do that. Whether that's a law enforcement partnership, whether that's a direct action, action, capability, whether

that's something about, you know, more like counter radicalization programs and ensuring that the kind of, you know, diplomatic and institutional support for law enforcement and justice systems are in place early in the system, so that it doesn't get too far ahead. When you need those sort of more disruptive capabilities at the end.

And so, this is the challenge, you know. And building the right kind of indications and warning infrastructure, doing it in a way that doesn't rely on a major military presence, high levels of boots on the ground, that always come with lots of intelligence, resources and looking across a non-traditional information and intelligence environment to pull all information together and understand the aspects of the threat most clearly. That's our challenge as an intelligence community today. And it is different than the way that we have been doing it over the last, you know, 20 plus years.

Levitt: Let me ask you a couple of questions about al-Qaeda.

Abizaid: Sure.

Levitt: You mentioned al-Qaeda is still a threat. Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed in Kabul in July, though in what I find kind of comical sense neither the group nor the Taliban are willing to acknowledge that, they don't seem to have an obvious or declared leader. Although some strong candidates are based in Iran, which creates an interesting dynamic.

Abizaid: Fascinating dynamic.

Levitt: First off, I guess. Where do you see the center of gravity for al-Qaeda? Zawahiri's gone. They have some groups that are really affiliated or somewhat affiliated in Syria. They've got leaders in Iran. Where is the center of gravity of al-Qaeda today?

Abizaid: That is the question. And I mean look, I would tell you that in a way that a lot of us in the CT world have sort of a tendency to be dismissive about Zawahiri was the center of gravity for that network. I mean he was the singular leader, he was, you know, both symbolically important, but also strategically important for what was a diverse network of affiliate structure that brought kind of different players to the table for decision making on, you know, seeing through the al-Qaeda vision of prioritization against the West and engagement and entrenchment in local communities. And his removal, I think, is a strategic and symbolic setback, because the loss of him as that senator of gravity really does kind of test the ties that bind the rest of these affiliates. Whether it's the Yemen-based affiliate with AQAP, whether it's JNIM and all of its own expansion that's happening, whether it's Shabab and how committed is Shabab really to the global agenda, whether it's, you know, these kind of almost defunct elements in Afghanistan, with al-Qaeda and the Indian subcontinent. Huras al-Din in Syria.

I mean, these are all pockets of al-Qaeda elements, some of whom know each other, all of whom kind of connected to a central rallying figure in a central call, and the question for al-Qaeda that it hasn't answered for itself is who follows. And, yes, the best candidates are Saif al-Adel and Abd al-Rahman al-Maghrebi that are sitting in Iran. What does al-Qaeda think about that? How does the network respond to the fact that those leaders are there and almost certainly with the knowledge of the Iranian Government? And what does that mean for their credibility? What does that mean for their ability to lead a very diverse organization that is becoming less and less connected because its leaders have been decimated?

Levitt: Let me ask you about al-Qaeda affiliate groups in Syria. You mentioned her Huras al-Din. At one point we had talked about the Khorasan group, which is a thing that we kind of gave to a group because we didn't know what they called themselves, but they were from Afghanistan, from Khorasan. And, of course, there's now HTS, formerly Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, formerly Nusra, formerly three other things beforehand. How do you see

the al-Qaeda presence in Syria today?

Abizaid: I mean with all its branch plans and splitting and infighting and, you know, in some ways weakening of all of those sort of factions that you mentioned, the core al-Qaeda presence that I focus on is Huras al-Din. It's the core al-Qaeda presence that CENTCOM focuses on. You see it in some of their operations over the last year. Huras al-Din is concerning to me, not just because you know of its space to operate in Syria, where we have lots of actors who can operate, but because, you know, if we care about the ties that bind, their stature, some of the inner connectivity with other aspects of the Al-Qaeda network, I think, are important and really resonant in the Huras al-Din presence.

Levitt: And how much of a kind of counterterrorism focus do we have on a group like HTS, which remains a designated foreign terrorist organization, sometimes carries out operations targeting even more extreme elements in Syria? They don't seem to be the good guys, but maybe aren't as bad as Huras al-Din or others.

Abizaid: Well, I mean, I would say, our counterterrorism focus in any theater is going to be first and foremost against those organizations and individuals that are threatening the United States. And when whether you're a part of HTS or Huras al-Din or ISIS and that threat is clear, then, especially in a theater like Iraq and Syria, you will have a lot of attention placed on you as we look to protect our interests.

Levitt: Getting back to Africa for one second, I think a lot of people when we talk about Africa, they think East Africa. You mentioned al-Shabaab. They think Sahel. You mentioned JNIM. There are also Islamic State elements in both those places. But I noticed that recently there have been there was a Treasury designation, there was a State Department travel warning both for terrorist activity by some of these groups or their affiliates in places like South Africa. To what extent do you feel that the threat is spreading to other parts of Africa? And what can we do to increase capacity for countries in the region to be able to deal with these threats?

Abizaid: So, I think you're right. I mean the main focus and where we are most concerned about that inflection point, I talk about; about that sort of a local or regional threat becoming a transnationally relevant one to us here in the United States. Our main concern is Somalia. Our main concern is Sahel. But that doesn't mean that you haven't seen ISIS' or al-Qaeda's expansion elsewhere. And particularly ISIS, you know the South Africa story is a very interesting story. It is not often that the State Department will release a threat warning in a country that is so far afield from those kind of traditional hubs that we've been watching from a counterterrorism
perspective. And they did. They did that with South Africa.

Mozambique is another interesting example. You look at the DRC and the kind of ISIS inroads that are happening there. And so, you know, when I talk about the overall, ISIS threat, and I talk about sort of this expansion onto the continent, there are certainly the parts of the continent that you would expect that ISIS is making inroads into, but it's these other expansionary areas like South Africa, like Mozambique, like DRC that, you know, provide us that sort of warning framework that we really need to understand, so that so that we know sort of (1) Are they isolated? How interconnected are they? How much are they learning from each other? Are they just calling themselves ISIS because it's advantageous, or are they getting something beneficial from that association? And where does that benefit most meaningfully impact US interests in the region and US interest for further afield?

Levitt: So, I've got to ask a couple of Afghanistan questions.

Abizaid: Okay.

Levitt: US and coalition forces withdrew in August 2021 and two months later a senior US official testified before Congress that IS Khorasan in particular "could potentially" is how he put it "develop the capability to

launch external attacks within 6 to 12 months. And Al-Qaeda again, could potentially" was his term "have that capability in 1 to 2 years." So, we're kind of at or nearing that window now. Both groups remain active in Afghanistan, especially IS Khorasan. How do you assess the threat specifically to US interests from Afghanistan? And how realistic is over the horizon counterterrorism?

Abizaid: Well, so lots to unpack there as you can imagine. First of all, you've cited one senior US official. There have been others that have cited different timelines, especially in the immediate aftermath of the drawdown in Afghanistan. I mean, you know, we were all trying to understand what this new reality of a Taliban led Afghanistan, of an Afghanistan where the ANDSF no longer had control of the prison system. What did that mean to appreciably change the threat and those organizations that were present there?

And I think, as we've learned over the last year, plus since that withdrawal, you know, one, you've got to disaggregate the al-Qaeda problem from the ISIS-K problem. They're completely different in that, you know, al-Qaeda has to worry about what the Taliban has to say about their presence there. Al-Qaeda has a relationship with the Taliban. The Taliban has an interest in ensuring that Al-Qaeda does not present a major threat. The shock of Zawahiri sitting in downtown Kabul was, you know, striking because all of those interests that the Taliban has wrapped up in international legitimacy and trying to move the country forward, even though in many ways they're moving it backwards.

And so, you know, the al-Qaeda dynamic is just very different. There's, again, that defunct al-Qaeda and the Indian subcontinent group, which is increasingly less of a threat in terms of what's on my radar. You look at the sort of old school al-Qaeda presence, those that have intermarried and engaged with elements of the Taliban. And yes, they're there. But are they organized and coalesced into a real effort against the United States? Not as far as I can tell. And even Zawahiri being in downtown Kabul, he was in downtown Kabul isolated from the rest of the Afghanistan based elements. As far as we can tell. The Haqqani network wanted to make quite sure of that, and you could see it in the cover up that they tried to pursue in the immediate aftermath of the strike.

And so, you know, the al-Qaeda problem there is a problem that is much different than what I am seeing related to ISIS Khorasan. And with ISIS Khorasan there are just aspects here that we have got to be very mindful of, you know. You look at the notoriety they got out of the Abbey Gate attack as we were evacuating so many Afghans and Americans from Afghanistan in those waning months of August.

You look at some of their historical activities, their interest in encouraging attacks, whether in Europe and the United States or otherwise. You look at their own fight for survival against the Taliban, and how much of any external ambition they have is really about delegitimizing the Taliban and the sense of security that that Afghans feel.

And so, when I look at and look, I mean Afghanistan and the region in general also has other sort of CT elements, this diverse milieu of whether it's TTP or IMU, or you know, ETIM. There are so many threat actors there. But the threat actor that I am most concerned about raising a threat to the United States, a threat outside of Afghanistan is ISIS Khorasan.

That doesn't mean we don't care about al-Qaeda, it doesn't mean we take our eye off the ball. It just means that as we focus our efforts, we've got to just be very, very vigilant about how that will evolve.

Now in terms of over the horizon CT. One, you know, the best example that it can work is the Zawahiri strike. I mean the level of tradecraft, intelligence excellence, interagency collaboration that led to the ability to not just detect Ayman al-Zawahiri downtown in Kabul but find an option for the President to take him out in a way that resulted in zero collateral damage is just incredible. And so yes, it can work. You will not have every single case of over the horizon opportunity look like the Zawahiri strike. But it can work.

But I actually hate the phrase over the horizon CT.

Levitt: Me too.

Abizaid: I think that what we have to do in Afghanistan is what we have to do against any hard target, which is, you know, have a diverse intelligence collection and operational strategy that looks not just at Afghanistan, looks at the surrounding region, looks at concentric circles around that, understand the networks-which are transnational-that affect who's going to Afghanistan, who's leaving from Afghanistan. And then we work with partners, we work with our own unilateral capability, and we find ways to disrupt real threats.

And so that's what we're doing in Afghanistan. That's what we're doing across the CT community broadly speaking, and that's the important work that has to continue.

Levitt: So let me shift from the Sunni violent extremist milieu to the Shia. The community spends a lot of time what we sometimes call the Iran Threat network, and often that's more about the network than about Iranian operations themselves. But in the past few years now, Iran has been engaged in what you've described as a diverse campaign in pursuit of avenging the targeted killing of Qasem Soleimani three years ago this month. Tell me about how you assess Iran's foreign operations targeting current or former US officials, targeting dissidents and journalists in New York and London, and doing abduction plots and surveillance to service all of these.

Abizaid: I would describe Iran's interest in conducting terrorist attacks overseas as one of the most striking developments coming back into the CT community as I've sort of relearned where we are in the overall threat environment. Yeah, they are very active and intent on revenge for Soleimani. They are very active and intent on escalatory tit for tat with the Israelis, as far as we can tell you. Look at the disruption that we saw in Turkey last year.

You know, you look at the degree to which they are engaged with their Shia militant proxies in the Middle East. What, whether it's in Syria, whether it's in Iraq or Yemen, or elsewhere, the kind of proliferation of technology that's happening to those Shia militant proxies. And you know what I see is a pretty brazen Iranian threat network that is willing to explore avenues for attack internationally, and in the region that I would have thought they would have been deterred from in our past sort of analysis.

Just the, you know, the news of the plot against a former National Security Adviser here in the United States. You know, it reminds me of a 2011 plot to kill the Saudi Ambassador at a restaurant in Washington, DC. I mean it's both incredibly brazen, also not inconsistent with things we've seen them do in the past. But I think we're seeing it more often and in a way that I am very concerned about sort of how well metered it is and how well we are all actors in this sort of play. How well we understand the escalation ladder that we are on, or could be on, as things occur.

So, I mean, you know, just a couple of days ago I think we saw the release of yet another threatening video from an IRGC-affiliated at least account, you know, naming former president Trump, former National Security Adviser, former CENTCOM commander as key targets in a revenge campaign. And that, you know, that interest continues, that they're very public about that interest. And that we have actual evidence of them trying to pursue that interest inside the United States is a real concern. And, you know, the threats against Iranian activists and journalists here in the United States are also persistent and concerning and so yeah. Iran is keeping it interesting, and it's not just a proxy battle. It's not just a proxy battle. It's something that Iran is leveraging its own capability to threaten various actors across the world.

Levitt: Aside from Iran's statements, Lebanese Hezbollah leaders have also been vocal about wanting to exact revenge.

Abizaid: Nasrallah directly, right?

Levitt: Exactly Nasrallah directly for Qasem Soleimani's death. And just yesterday the State Department issued a Rewards for Justice, requesting more information about Hezbollah financiers, who'd already been designated by Treasury, in this case in Guinea, in Africa. How concerned are you given those types of activities? The conviction of Hezbollah operatives in New York City for activities they engage in here in the United States and abroad. How worried are you specifically about activity carried out by Lebanese Hezbollah?

Abizaid: So, I'm always worried about activity carried out by Lebanese Hezbollah. Certainly in the region. Certainly as an extension of the Iranian state. You know, of the proxies, it is the most capable. And, you know, almost the most mature in a way Hezbollah has its own interests that it'll take after. That it will take care of even as the Iranian Government looks to leverage it in in multiple scenarios.

But, you know, Hezbollah has a history of capability that goes well outside the region, and they have a level of, you know, operational security, a level of sophisticated tradecraft that make them a very difficult target to understand and track. And so, I never count Hezbollah out. I never consider their next evolution one that will be purely political. I think we've seen time and again the usefulness to Iran of them maintaining both a significant military capability, but also a clandestine capability that could be leveraged in extreme circumstances.

And you know, we remain focused on them as a major CT actor.

Levitt: Okay, last, before we go to the questions that have come in via the Q&A on Zoom and the email, which again is policyforum@washingtoninstitute.org.

Let me ask you something that we've discussed in the past, and I've discussed with your staff in the past. We did a big study on it here at the Washington Institute, which is this big change in our counterterrorism 20 years after 9/11. We've been really successful in what I described as tactical counterterrorism, preventing attacks, finding, fixing, finishing. The way we've done that is no longer sustainable, and we have to do things differently. And on top of that I would argue that while we've had tremendous tactical success, we've basically had, forgive me, but strategic failure in that there are, I think, exponentially more people radicalized to the point of being willing and interested in carrying out acts of terrorism, violent extremism today than there were on 9/11. So how do we continue to take advantage of all the things that we learned to do over the past 20 years that are so good at preventing the next attack? You know, we have the Saipov on trial in New York today for driving, you know, a vehicle into pedestrians on Halloween several years ago. Preventing those types of attacks in a more sustainable fashion and what type of non-kinetic tools can we put in place to try and get ahead of the radicalization? It's really two questions.

Abizaid: Yeah. Well, first of all, I mean, this challenge is exactly why I came back to government. It is why I wanted to be the director of the National Counterterrorism Center because I think it's really important that we're smart about how we manage what is an important transition for the National Security kind of apparatus in the United States.

You know, credit to the years of counterterrorism pressure, and the sophistication of what we built post-9/11, that we are at a place where we can talk about a transition out of a CT led national security foreign policy. And, you know, I'm really proud, I've been a part of that earlier in my career, and I'm really you know, eager in this role in this moment to have rational conversations about what pieces of that must we preserve, so that we can continue to defend against all manner of terrorist adversaries. So, we can continue the sort of unique collaboration environment that the CT enterprise has created, so that we can continue to get the right amount of collections, so that we understand the indications and warning challenges that are so present in today's evolution. You talk about how more, how much more diffuse sort of you know the terrorist problem is. That diffusion

comes with its own challenges. That means that I view this kind of moment we're in as a moment of investing in CT as a foundational capability, so that we can enable the rest of the national security structure to go and do the important work of countering the strategic competition or dealing with the Russia-Ukraine conflict or evolving our capability against cyber threat actors of various capability. Looking at transnational organized crime as a real national security challenge that has to be addressed.

And so, for me, I mean, that's the moment that we're in as CT leaders as national security leaders, we are engaged in a regular dialogue about what are the right capabilities to preserve? How do you invest in those at a level where you're going to be able to use them and use the right tool in the right circumstance? And yes, a lot of those tools are less about direct action. They're even less about law enforcement, and it's more about some of these fundamental kind of global fragility challenges that need to be buttressed against, so that we don't find ourselves back here in another twenty years.

So, we've got to sustain the tactical pressure. We've got to be strategic about our investments in in statecraft and diplomacy in sort of underlying conditions, in various challenging parts of the world. And we need to do it in a way that still enables us to take care of our national security interests that are not about CT, but about the future of the global order.

Levitt: This has been fantastic, and I have a hundred more questions, but I promise we'd get to our Q&A. So that's what we'll do now. So, the first question asks about upcoming Supreme Court cases that involve the internet and potential review of Section 230. I'm not interested in you commenting on the Supreme Court cases.

Abizaid: Thank you.

Levitt: You're very welcome. But gene rally how concerned are you about the ways in which social media empowers and enables bad actors? And what can we do about it?

Abizaid: So, look, I mean as much as I'm a huge fan of you know the tech revolution of the interconnectivity that social media has provided. There are downsides, and one of the downsides is how much easier it has made it for bad actors of various stripes, including terrorists from all over the world to connect with each other, to radicalize each other from afar, to engage in the kind of plotting that would threaten the United States, would threaten our allies, our partners. And so, we have to have the ability to be in dialogue with those companies that can understand this at a deeper level in terms of how terrorists are using the internet. What do we understand from an intelligence perspective? And how does that marry up with, you know, the kind of policies any individual company has in terms of content moderation and what's acceptable on their platform? And the dialogue is just really important. And so, you know, I think that we've got to be concerned. We've got to be vigilant, but we also have to create space for technology to thrive. And so, we're doing all of those things from a CT perspective.

Levitt: So, I'm going to try and bundle questions together, so we can get to as many as possible, so you might not hear them expressed as you wrote them. But we're getting to them. A few questions want you to provide a little more detail picking up when we were talking about ISIS Khorasan threat in Afghanistan. You said that there were all kinds of assessments, some right after. So, can you assess the near term long-term threat of external operations by ISIS-K or al-Qaeda launched from Afghanistan? Or are these groups, or ISIS-K anyway, too tied up right now fighting the Taliban?

Abizaid: So, I'll answer it with ISIS-K in mind. And I think the group is primarily tied up in fighting the Taliban. I think the Taliban understands it is their number one security threat. And I think, notwithstanding that I am concerned about their external ambition. Now the timeline to build a sophisticated external operational platform, which a group like ISIS-K has actually never effectively pulled off. That's a whole different

question, and there's lots of nuance underneath it. So I'm not going to venture, you know, an estimate in terms of you know how long it will take before that emerges, you know, irrespective of any kind of interventions. But I will say that I am they are both concerned about the threat from the Taliban, and I am concerned about their external ambition, which is part of their effort to counter the Taliban.

Levitt: We have a whole bunch of questions that are Russia related.

Abizaid: Ok.

Levitt: Should Russia be considered a State sponsor? Should Wagner be considered a terrorist group? How much support are REMVE groups receiving from nation states like Russia?

Abizaid: So, I'll leave the State, I'll wait for your next State Department guest to answer the State sponsor question. And you know how we think about Russia, how we think about Wagner. You know Wagner as a problematic actor in places where we need to make serious CT progress is a major concern of ours. You look at Mali, you look at the Sahel and I think you know what you see is like Wagner's counterproductive presence there. It's just problematic.

But you know, as we think about racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists. The one group that has been designated is the Russian Imperialist Movement. We saw, you know, some very concerning, you know, letter bomb campaigns in Spain here recently. You know, I'm not going to sort of comment on any Russian ties, or even attribution to RIM there. But those are the questions that we are constantly asking ourselves, which is, how does the conflict in Russia-Ukraine change Russia's calculus about engaging with state actors? What kind of state actors would be most sympathetic to Russian objectives? And how do we understand that manifestation of the threat in a way that's sophisticated keeps pace with it but doesn't try and use the tropes that we have used in the sort of Sunni Islamic violent extremist world, you know, to understand?

Levitt: This is a nice transition to another basket of questions which get to our ability to balance strategic competition, great power competition, and counterterrorism. And you've talked about counterterrorism being an enabling factor that if we do this well, we create the space for people to be able to put resources to great power competition. But in this context, how good are we at finding the Venn diagram overlap? You know, in Africa, for example, I think counterterrorism is one very big form of currency.

Abizaid: Absolutely. I think this is a really important question. And it also kind of undercuts this it's either strategic competition or it's counterterrorism. I mean, first of all, that's so like binary that you know none of us that really work in national security think about it in that way. But you know there are really important aspects of the counterterrorism relationship that we have built over time that matter to the strategic competition landscape. There are really important parts of what we can offer from a counterterrorism perspective that address certain countries number one concerns even as we're trying to have long term strategic conversations about the United States as the partner of choice, you know, vis-à-vis Russia, China, or any other actors. And so, at from a policy perspective, from an intelligence perspective, understanding that Venn diagram, and where the opportunities for the United States exist. And I think, particularly in parts of Africa, there are real opportunities that present themselves now. Those are the opportunities that we as a CT community need to be part of the strategic competition conversations to make sure that we're that we're leveraging effectively.

Levitt: Following up on the social media question. We have a bunch of people who are asking questions that boil down to how much radicalization, in general, and particularly in the United States, is driven today by online propaganda versus offline, direct contact with an extremist or an intermediary? And do you see a trend in increasing extremism, solely driven by propaganda?

Abizaid: That's a great question. In fact, I'll probably take it back to my analysts and ask for a real answer. But

I would venture to guess that the online environment is where most of the most of the radicalization is occurring. Most of the consumption of extremist propaganda. Whatever version of extremist propaganda you're interested in is passed around in online social media environments. And in some ways, you know, we are seeing trends where very divergent ideologies are kind of coming together in a single individual's mind as inspiring. And so, whether they're an HVE or a DVE is very difficult to determine based on their browsing history. Right? So yeah, I mean, I think online propaganda is quite problematic. Online networks that share that problem, that propaganda. And the investment that you see from terrorist groups in slick propaganda I think shows the value proposition to them of being able to get new adherence to their cause.

Levitt: So, we clearly have some of your local and state partners participating today. And there's a lot of praise, but also several questions about how might NCTC enhance information sharing. One person says nice things, and then expresses some disappointment in the decommissioning of the act, knowledge, application.

Abizaid: I didn't pay anyone for this. This is these are wonderful questions. Please continue.

Levitt: Of course. We're just here to serve.

Abizaid: Yes.

Levitt: What's NCTC's plan to support state and local?

Abizaid: So, first of all, just broadly speaking, I think it's critically important if we are to be the United States Government knowledge repository for terrorism, we have to engage with individuals that actually need that information. And those individuals are—yes, senior policymakers here in the Beltway, yes, individuals with high top secret security clearances. They are also our state and local partners that are pursuing cases that are looking for signs that individuals are mobilizing to violence, that are dealing with this on a daily basis, and just trying to understand what are the kinds of tools, what's the information, what's the background they need to understand how to protect their communities.

And that is a space that I think we, as the National Counterterrorism Center, need to be able to support. Now we do it obviously in coordination with and support of our DHS counterparts, our FBI and DOJ counterparts, those lead domestic agencies. But you know we have information, knowledge and expertise that we want to get out and get out at the lowest classification level possible. So, we can inform the way in which our, you know, first line protectors can protect their communities.

And so, for me this is a big area of focus as we think about the evolution and the transition of the CT community. We have to think about how that it manifests in the customer environment that we're trying to serve. And we need to get information into the hands of individuals that are most likely to experience or protect from a terrorist attack. And those are state, local, tribal, territorial, private sector elements that can really help us protect America.

So, I've got an organization that's focused on outreach, focused on both international and domestic kind of engagement, so that our knowledge can be shared effectively. And as part of that, we did do a fantastic job actually on one of the United States Government's first information sharing apps called 'Acknowledge' that we stood up last year. We spread it to federal, state, local, and some international counterparts. But, you know, just in response to Congressional direction, we had to decommission it. So, you know, we were really proud of that app. We thought it got information into the hands of individuals that needed it. We thought it provided great contextual and situational understanding of what was happening. But now there are other ways that we will continue to serve. We will do it through email distributions. I would, you know, I'm happy to in the and you know, after this, get out to any of those that are asking, the way in which they connect with our 24/7 ops center to get the information that we were disseminating through that app. We will still serve our state and

local, tribal, territorial, private sector, etc. customers. We'll just do it in a different way.

Levitt: You heard it here.

I got a whole bunch of questions about Syria. We're not going to be able to cover them all. But, to what extent do you see the Syrian Civil War as a kind of festering wound that is going to continue to drive extremism in the region either because of the Sunni jihadist groups that are operating there—some of them trying to govern because of the presence of Iranian proxies, sometimes shooting at US forces—or to be blunt because of the presence of President Assad?

Abizaid: Yeah look, I mean the challenges in Syria are…I mean, you talk about that Venn diagram of strategic competition, of terrorism. You know, you look at like the aspects of the Iranian threat network, I mean, it's all happening in Syria all at the same time, including on single flights that we're trying to deconflict our operations that we're trying to pursue. The complexity that I think the conflict in Syria introduces into how we manage the CT fight is significant. And as much as I sort of talk about ISIS core sort of being managed into a local insurgency, and one that we must sustain pressure on. I also recognize you've got over you have significant population of radicalized individuals in IDP camps, in prisons scattered throughout Syria that represent the potential of a future threat if not appropriately engaged and handled and protected against. And so yeah, it's a festering problem. It's a festering problem with a degree of complexity that all aspects of our national security challenges really just show up in that one territorial conflict. And it requires a level, I think, of sophistication, collaboration, and engagement across intelligence, operational, and policy communities that we just gotta kind of force because it won't happen naturally.

Levitt: So, I pretend to be a nice person most of the time. But you're about to find out that I'm not really because I've saved the big one for last. And that is, and great segue there. So, what do we do about al-Hawl? Al-Hawl for me is kind of the big nightmare, and just today our partners in the region announced a bunch of arrests thwarting an attack, including several operatives who came directly from al-Hawl, so it's not completely locked down. What do we do about al-Hawl?

Abizaid: What do we do about al-Hawl?

Levitt: In about, you know, two minutes.

Abizaid: Yeah, what do we do about al-Hawl? Again, I am looking forward to my State Department and policy colleagues to come here and answer that question. But it is, I mean it is a significant challenge. And it's, you know, on the one hand, you want to engage the international community to make sure that the humanitarian situation is protected. Right? On the other hand, you've got large populations, a very large population of foreigners that you want to get out of the situation in Syria and back into their home countries. And for lots of different reasons, negotiating those repatriations, or engaging with those foreign counterparts, will result in at best mixed success. But slow success, right? We're talking about, you know, thousands and thousands and thousands of individuals and success that happens in the tens and the fives.

And so, it is a problem that we've got to stay focused on. We've got to continue to chip away at. We need to understand the dynamics of, and to be honest, I mean, it is an intelligence challenge to really understand what's happening in these camps where we have very limited access. And we just can't lose sight of what that problem could mean for the future of the threat. What it means for how it evolves next? And so, we've got our work cut out for us.

Levitt: And, of course, how to solve al-Hawl is not really NCTC's bailiwick. But, so long as it is a problem, having the ability to understand what's going on in and through and about is.

Abizaid: Exactly.

Levitt: I want to thank you for taking the time to schmooze here today, and to be so open with your thoughts. I want to thank you all for joining us and thank you for so many of your questions. Thank you very, very much.

Abizaid: Yeah, no, thank you very much. It was really great.