

A Counterterrorism Strategy Disconnected from the Terrorist Landscape

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Brief Analysis

In focusing on cartels and gangs in the Western Hemisphere as well as left-wing extremists, the administration's "radical shift" elides certain threats from the Middle East along with the political right, while appearing to write off diplomacy and capacity building as key tools.

On May 6, the Trump administration released its second-term [counterterrorism strategy](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/2026-USCT-Strategy-1.pdf) (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/2026-USCT-Strategy-1.pdf>), a document that departs in emphasis from its predecessors, including the first Trump administration's strategy. But it largely does not surprise given the administration's broader policy approach during its current term. Namely, the strategy:

- Identifies the Muslim Brotherhood as the key driver of jihadist terrorism.
- Expands the parameters of counterterrorism to include cartels and gangs.
- Focuses on left-wing terrorism.

The administration casts these new priorities as a "radical shift" from previous counterterrorism policy, grounded in "reality-based threat assessments." But it often does not live up to its own criteria, and the document simultaneously raises questions about how the administration prioritizes terrorism threats and whether it can successfully carry out its mission. In particular, Iran and its proxies do not feature with sufficient prominence in the strategy. Tehran may well emerge from the current war both dangerous and determined, with its proxy network intact—threats that could require a reevaluation of the approach laid out in this document.

Prioritization

The strategy enumerates three major types of terrorist groups confronting the United States: narco-terrorists and transnational gangs; global jihadists such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS); and violent left-wing extremists,

including anarchists and anti-fascists. The strategy also makes clear that among these threats, the top priority is fighting cartels and gangs in the Western Hemisphere. This represents a notable shift from the first Trump administration's counterterrorism strategy, which stated that "radical Islamist terrorists remain the primary transnational terrorist threat to the United States."

While the continued focus on global jihadist groups is appropriate, given that IS and al-Qaeda are still active and dangerous around the world, the overall prioritization offers many reasons for concern:

- The strategy makes clear that the administration plans to dedicate additional counterterrorism resources to addressing cartels and gangs in the Western Hemisphere that are newly designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations. Given declining resources for counterterrorism, including through foreign assistance, such an allocation will leave fewer assets available to address the most serious terrorist threats, including those from the global jihadist groups and Iran-linked entities. The Western Hemisphere has typically been an area of limited counterterrorism focus, with the exception of targeted efforts against Iran-connected actors. But now, the U.S. State Department's limited counterterrorism foreign assistance resources will likely be increasingly focused on gangs and cartels in the Western Hemisphere at the expense of critical priorities elsewhere. Such efforts could also potentially duplicate the work of the State Department's International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Bureau, for which this region and issue set have been a top priority for decades.
- Iran's omission from the strategy's three categories of counterterrorism priorities is perplexing, given the war underway since late February. Although Iranian threats are covered later in the document, their scope is limited to the nuclear issue, the missile program, and Tehran's support for proxies, while failing to mention Iran's own terrorist activities. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force and Iran's Ministry of Intelligence have been highly active of late in developing their own plots, including in the U.S. homeland. Iran's absence as a priority is even more puzzling given the direct IRGC Qods Force involvement in plots to assassinate President Trump. (And only days before the Iran war began, the FBI director fired approximately a dozen personnel (<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/25/us/politics/patel-fbi-firings-trump-classified-records.html>) from a counterintelligence team responsible for tracking Iranian threats because they had been involved in Mar-a-Lago investigations of the president during the Biden years.)
- The strategy highlights left-wing terrorism as a top priority, but entirely omits its counterpart on the far right, even as the Anti-Defamation League has documented a dramatically higher prevalence of right-wing terrorist attacks in the United States relative to left-wing attacks. In fact, the 2024 Country Reports on Terrorism (<https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2024/>), published by the State Department in early May, details plots tied to neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and other far-right terrorists.

Importance of the Middle East

Taking a broader view, the document sends mixed messages on how critically the administration views the Middle East in its counterterrorism efforts, perhaps downplaying these threats to justify a pivot to the Western Hemisphere. The strategy does identify global jihadists and Iran as major concerns, and underscores the importance of freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea against the backdrop of the Iran war.

Yet the strategy also contends that while the Middle East has been the focal point for U.S. counterterrorism since the 1960s, growing domestic oil production now renders the region less central to American stability. The strategy likewise underplays discrete threats in the Middle East. While crediting President Trump with destroying the IS "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria in 2019, the document notes only that the "surviving remnants" were forced to relocate to Africa and central Asia. It offers no discussion of the current threat in Iraq and Syria, even amid the escape of thousands of IS fighters and their family members from displaced persons camps and detention facilities in Syria. Perhaps this reflects a desire to avoid spotlighting a still-unsettled situation in Syria and increasing U.S. tensions

with Iraq, with U.S. military drawdowns only adding to the uncertainty. The Gaza Strip is mentioned only in the president's foreword, possibly because acknowledging a terrorism problem there would contradict the administration's narrative of having forged peace in the territory. Overall, the document implies aspirations to pivot away from the Middle East, even as the Iran war suggests that reality may get in the way.

U.S. Tools

The strategy lacks details on how the United States plans to enact this new approach, offering a general emphasis on kinetic efforts to kill terrorists. If terrorists strike the United States or American nationals, President Trump warns, "we will find you and we will kill you." Sanctions, law enforcement, and immigration actions also gain mention as instruments in the counterterrorism fight. But the document puts forth little beyond these lines of effort in charting a course to success.

The strategy makes almost no mention of diplomacy or coalition-building, features of the U.S. counterterrorism approach since 9/11 that also were key elements of the first Trump administration's counterterrorism strategy. The United States has regularly mobilized other governments to focus on America's counterterrorism priorities and worked to shape international norms in ways aligned with U.S. values. For example, America established and led the ninety-member Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS; created and facilitated international forums focused on Iranian terrorism; and developed and advocated UN Security Council resolutions on foreign terrorist fighters and terrorism financing, among other subjects. U.S. diplomacy has likewise been instrumental in persuading other governments to designate the IRGC and Hezbollah as terrorist entities. Yet the sole diplomacy reference in the document is to the "presidential diplomacy" in which President Trump has engaged to secure the release of U.S. hostages.

Nor does the strategy mention capacity building in any meaningful way—whereas the first Trump administration's document included a dedicated line of effort to "strengthen the counterterrorism abilities of our partners." This is an essential element of U.S. counterterrorism policy given the limited capabilities of many of these partners. Capacity building has for years been central to U.S. efforts to mobilize partners to do more to tackle the threats posed by IS, al-Qaeda, and Iran and its proxies.

Instead, the document repeatedly turns to the theme of burden sharing, arguing in essence that the United States has done its part and calling on other governments to do more. European states, according to the strategy, must intensify their counterterrorism activities and also provide greater assistance to African countries. Asia meanwhile is cast as mostly beyond the responsibility of the United States, and the strategy calls on south and central Asian countries to bear more of the burden of countering terrorism across the continent.

This apparent skepticism about counterterrorism capacity building is hardly surprising given the administration's broader views expressed on foreign assistance. The shift is reflected in the fiscal year 2027 budget request sent to Congress in early April, in which the State Department sought \$240 million for counterterrorism assistance, a sharp decline from the Biden administration's final request of \$330 million for FY 2025.

Finally, the U.S. strategy makes little mention of countering radicalization and recruitment, which also constituted a distinct line of effort in the first Trump administration's strategy. The earlier strategy included separate prongs for developing a "prevention architecture"; increasing the role of civil society; supporting reintegration efforts; and establishing effective counter-messaging platforms. The latest document does voice concern about south Asian and Arab nationals being radicalized in the United States and about the volume of anti-Western propaganda. But it offers a surprising antidote—developing robust information operations and counter-propaganda efforts—given the administration's dismantling of the Global Engagement Center and many U.S.-funded and operated broadcast channels. Similarly noteworthy is the absence of support for rehabilitation and reintegration programs, given that the United States has long pushed countries to repatriate IS fighters and family members from Syria and Iraq and

pointed to such programs as critical in mitigating associated threats.

Conclusion

The second Trump administration has made clear in its first sixteen months that it is pursuing a counterterrorism approach very different from previous administrations. Even as the new strategy confirms this shift, it leaves unanswered many questions about how this vision will be realized. When the Iran war ends, the administration will need to outline how the resulting environment has affected its priorities and resource allocation so as to protect U.S. nationals and interests against threats from the Middle East.

Michael Jacobson, a senior fellow in The Washington Institute's Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, formerly served as director of strategy, plans, and initiatives in the State Department's Counterterrorism Bureau. ❖

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