

America May Have Unlocked a Key to Fighting Terrorism -- and It Doesn't Involve Drones

by [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.



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A holistic approach to counterterrorism demands more than just a 'capture and kill' posture, and new funds for relevant State Department programs are a step in the right direction.

Buried in the 2,009 pages of the recently passed omnibus appropriations bill is what could be President Obama's most significant counterterrorism contribution to date -- and it involves no drones, Special Operations forces or other forms of military might. The use of Special Operations forces to train and equip local partners and to build military capacity to combat terrorist threats -- supporting frontline partners while keeping the United States out of large-scale armed conflicts -- has been a hallmark of the Obama administration. Perhaps counterintuitively, however, this model has promoted an overly militarized approach to counterterrorism by U.S.-trained partners. To be sure, military capacity-building is an essential component of the president's strategy for "taking out" terrorists who threaten the United States and supporting local forces to deal with threats in their back yards. But it has not been coupled with the necessary investment in building our partners' civilian departments and agencies -- ministries of justice, interior and corrections, among others -- that are also needed. That is, until now.

Speaking to graduating West Point cadets in 2014, the president announced the creation of the Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund (CTPF). He called on Congress to support the new fund, which he envisioned growing as large as \$5 billion, to build "a network of partnerships from South Asia to the Sahel" to counter terrorist groups where they seek a foothold. Members of Congress, however, worried the fund would amount to little more than a "slush fund" with little oversight. The State Department asked for \$500 million for its civilian programming under the fund for fiscal 2015 but received nothing. Meanwhile, the Defense Department received \$1.3 billion of its \$4 billion CTPF request -- continuing the long pattern of military-dominated counterterrorism efforts.

But something changed in fiscal 2016. Last month, as part of the omnibus appropriations bill, Congress appropriated \$175 million in CTPF funds for the State Department. While less than the amount requested, this is still a dramatic increase in the department's discretionary resources for civilian counterterrorism capacity-building programs. This will enable the State Department to significantly ramp up overseas programs with the departments of Homeland Security and Justice, the FBI and others focused on law-enforcement responses to terrorism, strengthening counterterrorism legal frameworks, prosecuting terrorism suspects, handling terrorist inmates and other civilian tasks.

The decision to finance civilian CTPF programming signals a significant bureaucratic shift in how the administration and Congress approach counterterrorism assistance -- sending a strong message that there is a key role for civilian actors. This shift is timely given the increasingly diffuse and dangerous threat landscape demonstrated by recent terrorist attacks around the world.

Congress will be watching closely to see how this money is spent and what performance metrics are used to measure success. But there is reason for optimism that it will produce tangible results because the department has delivered results in three areas of emphasis, even while operating on a shoestring.

First, the State Department has focused on the critical issue of foreign terrorist fighter travel. Last September, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2178, requiring member states to take concrete steps to apprehend and prosecute terrorist fighters who move to or from battle fronts such as Syria and Iraq. But many states lack the capabilities to follow through on these requirements, so the State Department initiated and funded programs to plug those gaps.

Second, the State Department has engaged in efforts to prevent and counter terrorist havens in key countries where a small financial investment could be leveraged into significant gains. In Africa, U.S.-trained law enforcement demonstrated increased capabilities to deal with Boko Haram and al-Shabab. Cooperation and exercises with Persian Gulf partners helped them to contend with Islamic State and al-Qaeda terrorist threats from Yemen. And in Southeast Asia and other locations around the world, U.S.-funded programs enabled countries to adopt procedures for handling terrorist inmates and countering prisoner radicalization.

Third, the State Department has launched an international initiative -- in close partnership with the Justice Department -- to raise awareness about Iran and Hezbollah's broad ranges of terrorist and criminal activities around the world and to increase law enforcement cooperation and coordination among a wide range of countries to disrupt these activities.

The department's relatively small investment in these areas led to tangible results last year, and a program to ramp up funding for such initiatives is long overdue. U.S. Special Operations forces are being deployed to counter terrorist threats in concert with local partners not only in Afghanistan but also in places such as Syria and Cameroon, and U.S. Special Operations Command training programs continue to expand to meet terrorist threats around the world. But as they do, civilian counterterrorism partners must be trained to handle what comes next. When military forces capture a terrorist, will prosecutors have the law they need to charge the suspect and be prepared to take that case to court? Partners need the civilian tools to patrol borders and fight radicalization, to counter terrorist financing and to prosecute terrorist crimes.

A holistic approach to counterterrorism demands the use of all elements of national power, not a solely militarized "capture and kill" posture. Drones and commandos can neutralize immediate threats, but to succeed in the long term, military and intelligence efforts must be part of a broader approach to counterterrorism that includes robust and capable civilian elements. Financing for the CTPF comes just in time, as Hezbollah is poised to get an infusion of money from Iran, as the Islamic State alternatively directs and inspires terrorist plots around the world and as al-

Qaeda rebuilds and expands in places such as Afghanistan and Yemen.

In his West Point speech, Obama acknowledged that the United States cannot and should not deal with the terrorist threats around the world on our own and that our partners must play an expanded and more critical role. While this is a good starting point, the more the United States can move toward a more balanced approach to counterterrorism -- not only in our own efforts but also in the type of partners we are aiming to build -- the safer we will be.

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute. ♦

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