



Transatlantic Cooperation on Countering Global Violent Extremism

Dr. Matthew Levitt

Fromer-Wexler Fellow, Washington Institute for Near East Policy

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Chairs Keating and Deutch, Ranking Members Fitzpatrick and Wilson, and distinguished committee members, thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today to discuss transatlantic cooperation on countering global violent extremism.¹ Today's hearing is timely, coming on the heels of both the twentieth anniversary of the September 11 attacks and the recent U.S.-led coalition withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Over the past two decades, the United States has built a counterterrorism bureaucracy to manage, resource, and operationalize the nation's intelligence, law enforcement, and military response to the threat posed by al-Qaeda in particular and terrorism more broadly. This counterterrorism enterprise has been remarkably successful from a tactical perspective, foiling attacks and disrupting terrorist networks. Terrorists today are far less likely to be able to carry out a spectacular attack like 9/11. From a strategic vantage point, however, our twenty-year struggle against terrorism has been far less successful given that many more people today are radicalized to violent extremism than in 2001, representing a more ideologically diversified and globally dispersed terrorist threat. Consider that two decades after 9/11, the U.S. government's database of known or suspected terrorists "has grown by almost a factor of 20."²

Turning the corner on this larger problem set demands two interrelated changes to the now two-decade-old U.S. approach to countering terrorism:

First, we must invest in our own and our allies' *civilian* counterterrorism capabilities in ways that to date we have only done in the realm of kinetic, military counterterrorism tool sets. This should involve a particular focus and investment in extremism *prevention*, which at its core is not a mission for counterterrorism agencies

¹ This testimony draws heavily on the author's recent Washington Institute monograph, *Rethinking U.S. Efforts on Counterterrorism: Toward a Sustainable Plan Two Decades After 9/11*, Policy Note 99 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2021), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/rethinking-us-efforts-counterterrorism-toward-sustainable-plan-two-decades-after>.

² Russell Travers, "Counterterrorism in an Era of Competing Priorities: Ten Key Considerations," PolicyWatch 3216, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 13, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/counterterrorism-era-competing-priorities-ten-key-considerations>.

but is rather the product of good governance, rule of law, equitable and well-functioning societies, and healthy communities. To get ahead of the terrorism problem will require seeing clinical social workers and local government as frontline first responders to address violent extremism. Violent extremism is a global problem that has at its core very local drivers, which require local responses.

Second, we must recognize that we cannot do everything on our own, nor should we be expected to shoulder the bulk of the cost—in blood and treasure—for countering violent extremism around the world on our own. As the Biden administration’s Interim National Security Strategic Guidance states, “Recent events show all too clearly that many of the biggest threats we face respect no borders or walls, and must be met with collective action,” including violent extremism and terrorism.³ While critical, this will be no easy lift.

U.S. counterterrorism agencies have developed extremely close working relationships with their foreign counterparts, especially when it comes to sharing information about plots in one another’s countries. But broadening U.S. efforts to work “by, with, and through” allies and local partners around the world on military counterterrorism missions will be easier said than done given America’s recent track record of abandoning local allies on short notice. More broadly, convincing partner nations to form burden-sharing alliances with the United States to address threats closer to their borders than our own will only be possible once the United States has taken tangible action to restore its credibility as a reliable long-term partner.

Rationalizing the U.S. Counterterrorism Posture

At a time of growing partisan polarization, the need to rationalize U.S. investment in counterterrorism represents a rare area of bipartisan agreement. According to one study, from fiscal year 2002 to 2017, the United States spent 16 percent of its entire discretionary budget on counterterrorism, totaling \$2.8 trillion or an average of \$186.6 billion annually over fifteen years.⁴ Great Power competition aside, the nation faces an array of critical challenges at home—from the public health and economic challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic to social and racial justice issues, infrastructure needs, climate change, and more—all of which demand significant investment at a time of shrinking budgets and a fast-growing federal deficit. Moreover, having appreciated the amount of time, money, and blood the United States is willing to expend to counter their inexpensive terrorist plots, U.S. adversaries believe that terrorism works.⁵

Leaders in both the Democratic and Republican Parties also stress the need to end “forever wars,” focus counterterrorism resources on protecting the U.S. homeland, and rely on foreign partners to take the lead—with U.S. support—on addressing terrorism in their neighborhoods. The terrorist threats facing the United States are more dispersed today than they were on September 11, 2001, but there is now general agreement on the need to adopt a more sustainable posture on the counterterrorism mission.

America’s post-9/11 counterterrorism enterprise has been tremendously successful in protecting the country from catastrophic attack for the past twenty years. Now, policymakers are keen to capitalize on the U.S.

³ Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, The White House, March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/03/interim-national-security-strategic-guidance/>.

⁴ “Counterterrorism Spending: Protecting America While Promoting Efficiencies and Accountability,” Stimson Center, May 2018, https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/CT_Spending_Report_0.pdf.

⁵ David Francis, “Here’s Osama bin Laden’s Letter to the American People,” *Foreign Policy*, May 20, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/20/heres-osama-bin-ladens-letter-to-the-american-people/>.

investment in counterterrorism, build upon gains in protecting the homeland, foster alliances to share the burden of fighting terrorists abroad, and most critically, do all this in a financially sustainable manner. In the words of then presidential candidate Joe Biden, “We must maintain our focus on counterterrorism, around the world and at home, but staying entrenched in unwinnable conflicts drains our capacity to lead on other issues that require our attention, and it prevents us from rebuilding the other instruments of American power.”⁶ But how the United States extracts itself from extended deployments directly contributes to the global violent extremist threat.

President Biden’s warning that focusing too closely on counterterrorism alone drains America’s capacity to deal with other, equally pressing threats is well taken. But the caution against “unwinnable” conflicts applies Cold War terms of victory and defeat to problems that require a nonbinary approach to interstate asymmetric warfare, including adversaries’ use of militant and terrorist proxies. This means seeing counterterrorism efforts not in Cold War terms of victory or defeat, but rather as ongoing efforts—short of both war and peace—in which both lethal and nonlethal tools are employed to compete with adversaries over time and disrupt acts of terrorism.⁷ The goal here is to keep threats at bay, not to destroy them and install something better in their place. Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, President Biden seemed to come to a similar conclusion: “There is a big difference between large-scale, open-ended deployments of tens of thousands of American combat troops, which must end, and using a few hundred Special Forces soldiers and intelligence assets to support local partners against a common enemy. Those smaller-scale missions are sustainable militarily, economically, and politically, and they advance the national interest.”⁸

Terrorism poses a persistent but not an existential threat to the United States. Terrorist attacks grab the public’s attention, skewing the inherently political process of developing and resourcing the national response, especially over time. But the United States faces a wide range of national security threats—white supremacist and other domestic violent extremists, nuclear programs, cybersecurity, environmental challenges, foreign espionage, transnational organized crime, election security, and failed states, to name a handful—and decades of investment to address one acute threat can cumulatively divert investment from other, equally pressing threats. Put simply, the goal of counterterrorism should be to transform the problem from a national security priority to a law enforcement issue. In November 2019, Russell E. Travers, then acting director of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), noted, “We will never eliminate terrorism, but a tremendous amount of good work has been done, which facilitates a conversation about comparative risk.”⁹ That conversation should focus not only on comparative risk but also on cost. By investing so many resources into the counterterrorism mission for 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 primarily kinetic missions. Thus, two factors—widening the national security aperture to address other priority threats, and making the

⁶ Joseph R. Biden, “Why America Must Lead Again,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.

⁷ For more on fighting such hybrid warfare, see Michael Eisenstadt, *Operating in the Gray Zone: Countering Iran’s Asymmetric Way of War*, Focus 162 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2020), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/operating-gray-zone-countering-irans-asymmetric-way-war>.

⁸ Biden, “Why America Must Lead,” <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.

⁹ Travers, “Counterterrorism in an Era of Competing Priorities,” <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/counterterrorism-era-competing-priorities-ten-key-considerations>.

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 power (military) and much more investment in inexpensive soft power (intelligence, diplomacy, civilian capacity building).¹⁰ That shift will entail a period of rebalancing, along with a transition period of burden shifting among partners and allies. U.S. military commanders were among the first to recognize this need. In 2013, then U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) commander Gen. Jim 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.”¹¹

Investing in Alliances and Partnerships

Under the Trump administration, a series of unaligned national strategies alternatively called for a shift away from counterterrorism and toward Great Power competition or for doubling down on the counterterrorism mission set. Speaking in February 2017, Joint Chiefs chairman Gen. Joseph Dunford laid out a “4+1” framework guiding U.S. Department of Defense prioritization of international threats and the capabilities needed to address them. Countering terrorism and violent extremism represented the “plus one” in the framework, after strategic competition with China and Russia and regional threats Iran and North Korea.¹² But no clear direction followed about how to operationalize this declared shift in terms of resource allocation or mission prioritization. In fact, the production of three largely unaligned national security strategies only exacerbated the problem. In the words of one former senior U.S. counterterrorism official, “I would challenge anyone to read the National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and the National Strategy to Counter Terrorism and tell me where we should spend our resources.”¹³ The Biden administration’s Interim National Security Strategic Guidance paper notes 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.¹⁴ But like Trump administration strategies, this interim guidance lacks direction on how to budget limited resources across these threats.

One key area of overlap among the Trump administration’s various national security strategies, which is shared by Biden administration statements, is the desire to work with allies and partners to counter global threats. The Trump administration’s counterterrorism strategy declared that the United States “must relentlessly focus on countering terrorism that jeopardizes American citizens and interests,” and not “dilute

¹⁰ 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>.

¹¹ 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/>.

¹² Fred Dews, “Joint Chiefs Chairman Dunford on the ‘4+1 Framework’ and Meeting Transnational Threats,” Brookings Institution, February 24, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brookings-now/2017/02/24/joint-chiefs-chairman-dunford-transnational-threats/>.

¹³ Former senior U.S. counterterrorism official, speaking at an expert roundtable held under Chatham House Rule, October 29, 2020.

¹⁴ White House, “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance,” March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

our counterterrorism efforts by attempting to be everywhere all the time, trying to eradicate all threats.”¹⁵ The Biden administration’s Interim National Security Strategic Guidance similarly pledges not to engage in “forever wars” and to “right-size” the U.S. military presence in the Middle East “to the level required to disrupt international terrorist networks, deter Iranian aggression, and protect other vital U.S. interests.”¹⁶ Yet developing, regional threats must also be addressed to prevent their growth into global threats targeting the U.S. homeland. Recall, for example, that President Barack Obama dismissed the Islamic State as the “junior varsity squad” in comparison to al-Qaeda, just six months before the group seized territory the size of Britain spanning parts of Iraq and Syria.¹⁷ America failed to foresee the IS threat, and then had no choice but to create a global coalition to inflict battlefield defeat upon the group.

Therefore, to address terrorist threats that do not imminently jeopardize U.S. citizens and interests, the United States must build robust, sustainable long-term alliances and coalitions *focused on conditions conducive to fragility, radicalization, and violent extremism*. Washington can and should take the lead on efforts where U.S. interests are most acutely at risk, but it should also very actively support other partner-led efforts. Partners will be far more willing to lead if the United States demonstrates a commitment to play small but critical enabling roles.

Under President Trump, the United States withdrew from a laundry list of international treaties and institutions, took a dismissive attitude toward America’s traditional European allies, belittled the NATO alliance, and dispensed with alliance building in favor of highly transactional and, typically, bilateral international engagement.¹⁸ Trump’s policies led one European counterterrorism official to comment, “Does the Trump administration not understand that its actions in Syria are undermining our national security? We are not an ocean away from Syria; the problem is at our back door.”¹⁹

The Biden administration’s need to restore U.S. credibility as a partner is all the more urgent following the Trump administration’s multiple knee-jerk announcements on military withdrawals from Syria. Defending his October 2019 decision to withdraw troops, President Trump tweeted that the United States “can always go back & BLAST!” should the Islamic State make a comeback. To which Brett McGurk—who previously

¹⁵ White House, “National Strategy for Counterterrorism,” December 2018, https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news_documents/NSCT.pdf.

¹⁶ White House, “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance,” March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

¹⁷ David Remnick, “Going the Distance,” *The New Yorker*, January 20, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/01/27/going-the-distance-2?currentPage=all>.

¹⁸ See, e.g., “Trump Administration Announces Withdrawal from Four International Agreements,” *American Journal of International Law*, January 14, 2019, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-journal-of-international-law/article/trump-administration-announces-withdrawal-from-four-international-agreements/83E4D3458A857770EA66160233E5382C>; and Alexander Smith and Shannon Pettypiece, “NATO Gathering Descends into Acrimony as Trump Criticizes Allies,” NBC News, December 4, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/nato-summit-braces-friction-after-bruising-first-day-n1095296>.

¹⁹ Matthew Levitt and Aaron Y. Zelin, “Repatriating Western Jihadists: The Impact of U.S. Syria Policy,” PolicyWatch 3086, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 27, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/repatriating-western-jihadists-impact-us-syria-policy>.

served as President Trump’s envoy to the counter-IS coalition and now serves in the Biden White House—responded, “Actually, you can’t. Who is going to sign up with us? Who is going to fight with us?”²⁰

The United States needs to “do stuff,” as the truism goes, to get allies to participate in and contribute toward alliances. This means leading on some counterterrorism lines of effort and supporting on others. As Secretary of State Antony Blinken acknowledged, U.S. allies “raise the questions of the durability of some of the actions we’re taking,” and the only effective answer to those questions is U.S. actions, not words.²¹ In order to convince allies to share more of the counterterrorism burden abroad, the United States must first convince them it will follow through on its commitments. The United States is the only country in the world with the assets capable of supporting military counterterrorism deployments over time, including key functions such as airborne refueling, transport and logistics, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR). In the words of one European official, “The enabling capacity of the United States is monumental.”²²

The United States will also have to invest in building partners’ capacity so that they can gradually assume more roles. In this formulation, any real burden sharing will have to be preceded by burden shifting, a process that will allow partners to develop their capabilities. Traditionally, moreover, the allied commitment to military counterterrorism missions decreases as the U.S. military posture declines. This calls for maintaining small American advise-and-assist efforts to support partner-led missions.

Here, the U.S. supporting role in Operation Barkhane is instructive. France has deployed some 5,000 soldiers to the Sahel region under the operation, fighting terrorists alongside the armies of the G5 Sahel (Mauritania, Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Niger).²³ The Niger-based U.S. contingent consists of 800–1,000 personnel serving in support roles, with aerial missions generally flown out of bases outside Africa. “With very few assets, the United States are [*sic*] providing asymmetric value not only from a tactical viewpoint, but also in terms of its strategic effect,” a U.S. Defense Department official explained.²⁴ Over time, Washington significantly reduced its level of support, while European forces have filled the gap. Brig. Gen. Cyril Carcy—the French air force officer who serves as Operation Barkhane’s deputy commander—noted, however, that “even though our dependency on the United States has diminished, we really need their help, as everything will take us longer...What takes us a month right now would take us a month-and-a-half without the U.S. help.”²⁵

Such an approach, however, requires investing more resources in terrorism prevention efforts and not just in more drones and Special Forces to “find, fix, and finish” today’s terrorists. Unfortunately, over the past two decades U.S. counterterrorism policy and programming abroad have been overly militarized, without commensurate investment in civilian terrorism prevention capabilities. Both at home and abroad, investing in

²⁰ Bobby Allyn and Rachel Martin, “Former Trump Envoy: Syria Withdrawal Is ‘Haphazard’ and ‘Almost Unprecedented,’” National Public Radio, October 8, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/08/768257239/former-trump-envoy-syria-withdrawal-is-haphazard-and-almost-unprecedented>.

²¹ “Transcript: NPR’s Full Interview with Secretary of State Tony Blinken,” National Public Radio, February 16, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/16/968332308/transcript-nprs-full-interview-with-secretary-of-state-tony-blinken>.

²² European official, speaking at an expert roundtable held under Chatham House Rule, November 17, 2020.

²³ “No ‘Immediate’ Reduction of France’s Sahel Force, Says Macron,” France 24, February 16, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20210216-france-will-step-up-anti-terror-efforts-in-the-sahel-says-macron>.

²⁴ Murielle Delaporte, “U.S. Military Support in Sahel: Allies at Work,” Breaking Defense, May 14, 2020, <https://breakingdefense.com/2020/05/us-military-support-in-sahel-allies-at-work/>.

²⁵ Ibid.

terrorism prevention programs will be critical to getting ahead of the radicalization challenge, whatever the ideology driving the violent extremism.

The United States should thus draw on its civilian departments and agencies to help foreign countries strengthen their ability to address radicalization, arrest and try terrorism suspects within the rule of law and with respect for human rights, and work with private and nongovernmental partners to build resilient communities. An example of an effective U.S. program is the State Department's Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund (CTPF). Working with the Departments of Homeland Security and Justice, the CTPF focuses on building up foreign partners' law enforcement responses to terrorism, reforming the security sector, strengthening counterterrorism legal frameworks, prosecuting terrorism suspects, handling terrorist inmates, and other civilian tasks. While military capacity building is an essential component of any counterterrorism program, it must be coupled with investment in partners' civilian departments and agencies, such as ministries of justice, interior, and corrections, among others. Shifting away from an overreliance on expensive hard power, and investing heavily in soft power instead, is the key to handling the fundamentally social underpinnings of the terrorism challenge, even as military capacity building must have a place in any counterterrorism program.²⁶

"Ultimately," CENTCOM commander Gen. Kenneth McKenzie cautioned, "enduring stability in the Middle East will not hinge on military capabilities unless they're reduced to a point that invites further instability."²⁷ A U.S. presence in key regions generates its own antibodies, which, in partnership with allies, can prevent conflict regions from spiraling out of control, creating conditions in which extremism grows and drawing in Great Power and near power competitors. But as underscored in the 2020 Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability—a U.S. interagency plan submitted to Congress as required under the Global Fragility Act of 2019—military force should be only one part of the solution. While generating support for preventive or crisis management efforts can be difficult, such initiatives are especially important to break the cycle of fragility and should be prioritized in areas where today's strategic investment can mitigate tomorrow's overwhelming crisis. For example, small amounts of U.S. financial support could fund local efforts to facilitate meaningful security and justice sector reforms, enhance provision of essential services, reduce corruption, and enfranchise disengaged sectors of society such as women, children, and minorities. As the strategy notes, "Strategic investment in prevention can save billions of U.S. dollars and achieve better outcomes over the long run."²⁸ It is a struggle, however, to secure funding today to address tomorrow's threats—finding ways to fund such efforts is an area where Congress could make a significant impact on the long-term security of the United States.

²⁶ Matthew Levitt, "America May Have Unlocked a Key to Fighting Terrorism—and It Doesn't Involve Drones," *Washington Post*, January 7, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/fighting-terrorism-takes-more-than-drones/2016/01/07/6786c68e-b3f4-11e5-a76a-0b5145e8679a_story.html.

²⁷ CENTCOM, "McKenzie Middle East Institute Engagement," <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/2497526/general-kenneth-f-mckenzie-jr-middle-east-institute-engagement-feb-8-2021/>.

²⁸ U.S. Department of State, *United States Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability* (2020), <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/us-strategy-to-prevent-conflict-and-promote-stability.pdf>.

Finally, America must address its domestic terrorism problem. In the eyes of many allies, the United States now functions as a de facto safe haven for transnational white supremacist and far-right violent extremists.²⁹ The January 6, 2021, insurrection threatened not only U.S. domestic institutions but also national security interests and foreign policy priorities. As an exporter of right-wing extremism, the United States has seen its image tarnished, undermining one of its best tools to draw partners to join counterterrorism efforts around the world: our example. “For almost two decades,” Russell Travers, the former acting NCTC director, noted, “the United States has pointed abroad at countries who are exporters of extreme Islamist ideology. We are now being seen as the exporter of white supremacist ideology.”³⁰

Of course, counterterrorism burden sharing may not always be possible. Even close partners who share a common overall sense of terrorist threats may prioritize them differently, or apply a different risk-reward calculus for any given action. But America’s closest allies tend to seek its partnership. “There might be some level of post-traumatic stress disorder” as a result of the Trump administration’s isolationism, unilateralism, and impulsive withdrawals in places like Syria, a European official explained. “But at the end of the day, all Europeans want a strong security partnership with the U.S. The question is whether this cooperation will be limited to core missions (identifying and sharing information about terrorist networks) or if we can move beyond this and together address the breeding grounds of terrorism and stabilization missions (Syria, Iraq, the Sahel).”³¹ The key to making the latter development more likely may come down to the United States revisiting its traditional reluctance to share decisionmaking with its European partners, and European partners revisiting their traditional discomfort over burden sharing.³²

Navigating Areas of Disagreement

“Diplomacy requires credibility,” President Biden has noted, adding that “in the conduct of foreign policy, and especially in times of crisis, a nation’s word is its most valuable asset.”³³ The first step in that direction is holding close consultations with partners and allies to determine how they prioritize the national security threats facing their countries and finding areas of common cause. Such meetings also present opportunities to help shape partners’ and allies’ threat perceptions, and build consistency between U.S. and partners’ and allies’ threat perceptions. There is broad consensus on the threats posed by Sunni Islamist extremists like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, for example, although sharp divisions—over matters like the Turkish incursion into

²⁹ United Nations, “Member States Concerned by the Growing and Increasingly Transnational Threat of Extreme Right-Wing Terrorism,” CTED Trends Alert, April 2020, https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CTED_Trends_Alert_Extreme_Right-Wing_Terrorism.pdf.

³⁰ Travers, “Counterterrorism in an Era of Competing Priorities,” <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/counterterrorism-era-competing-priorities-ten-key-considerations>.

³¹ European official, Chatham House Rule roundtable, November 17, 2020.

³² Charles Thépaut, *A New West in the Middle East: Toward a Humbler, More Effective Model of Transatlantic Cooperation*, Policy Note 88 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2020), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-west-middle-east-toward-humbler-more-effective-model-transatlantic-cooperation>.

³³ Biden, “Why America Must Lead,” <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.

northern Syria and whether to repatriate foreign fighters—have defined how key countries address these threats.³⁴

In some areas, disagreements persist over the threat level and the appropriate response to extremist actors, such as with Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi and other Shia militias, and Iranian operations such as assassination and bombing plots in Europe in recent years.³⁵

Hezbollah offers a case in point on how to navigate complicated matters related to violent extremism that include differences of opinion between transatlantic partners. Hezbollah poses a threat not only to regional stability in the Middle East,³⁶ but to international security as well, including in Europe. Consider, for example, Hezbollah’s stockpiling caches of ammonium nitrate—used to make explosives for terrorist attacks—in Europe, including in France.³⁷ According to the U.S. State Department, Europe now serves as a “vital platform” for Hezbollah operational, logistical, and financial activities.³⁸ However, several European Union member states, led by France, have long resisted efforts to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist group in its entirety under the EU’s counterterrorism designation authority (Common Position 931).

There are many reasons for this policy debate, though even the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation—Europol—concedes that Hezbollah is active in Europe and that the EU’s 2013 decision to designate only part of the group undermines investigations into its activities in Europe. In its 2020 European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report, Europol assessed that Hezbollah “is suspected of trafficking diamonds and drugs and of money laundering via the trade in second-hand cars. Capital is sent to Lebanon through the banking systems but also through physical transport of cash via commercial aviation.” However, the report added, Hezbollah “investigations face the difficulty of demonstrating that the funds collected are channeled to the military wing of the organization.”³⁹

³⁴ Charles Thépaut and Matthew Levitt, “The Counter-ISIS Coalition Has Much to Do After Baghdadi’s Death,” PolicyWatch 3213, Washington Institute for Near East Policy,” November 8, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/counter-isis-coalition-has-much-do-after-baghdadis-death>.

³⁵ Matthew Levitt, “Iran’s Deadly Diplomats,” *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 7 (August 2018), available at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-deadly-diplomats>; Matthew Levitt, “Fighters Without Borders’: Forecasting New Trends in Iran Threat Network Foreign Operations Tradecraft,” *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 2 (February 2020), available at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/fighters-without-borders-forecasting-new-trends-iran-threat-network-foreign>.

³⁶ Matthew Levitt, “Hezbollah’s Regional Activities in Support of Iran’s Proxy Networks,” Middle East Institute, July 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollahs-regional-activities-support-irans-proxy-networks>.

³⁷ “Ammonium Nitrate Destroyed or Discovered in France,” Lebanese Hezbollah Select Worldwide Activities Map and Timeline, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/#id=1250>.

³⁸ “State Department: Hezbollah Sees Europe as ‘Vital Platform’ for Operational, Logistical and Fundraising Activities,” Lebanese Hezbollah Select Worldwide Activities Map and Timeline, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/#id=1246>.

³⁹ “Europol Details Hezbollah Money Laundering Scheme,” Lebanese Hezbollah Select Worldwide Activities Map and Timeline, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/#id=788>.

U.S. officials across administrations consistently press the EU to expand its ban of Hezbollah, and members of Congress have issued bipartisan resolutions calling for the same.⁴⁰ Such efforts should continue, but an EU designation of Hezbollah is not the only tool available to restrict the group's operational capabilities.

The political and diplomatic reality that EU decisions are carried out by consensus means that a full designation of Hezbollah is dependent on getting all twenty-eight member states to agree on an issue that is the subject of significant policy debate. While continuing to try to move that debate along, what the U.S. government has successfully done over the past few years is work simultaneously with European countries at a national level and see what domestic policy tools they have at their disposal to constrict Hezbollah's operating environment. Some countries that have domestic terrorism designation authorities, like Britain, added all of Hezbollah to their terrorist proscription lists. Others, like Kosovo, enacted designation authorities and banned Hezbollah. But other countries that lack domestic designation or sanction authorities, and might otherwise have just pointed to the need for an EU-wide designation that they could implement, were convinced to use other tools. Germany banned Hezbollah and conducted law enforcement raids across the country. Lithuania used immigration authorities to restrict the travel of Hezbollah operatives in and out of the country. Austria employed its authority to ban the symbols of dangerous organizations and banned Hezbollah symbols, including its flag, explicitly arguing that the group makes no distinction between its political and military arms.

These countries broke the ice and have now paved the way for other countries to take actions of their own targeting Hezbollah, demonstrating that taking such action does not put a country at risk of Hezbollah retaliation, for example. One common thread among these various actions is that each respective national parliament got engaged on the issue. Among European parliaments currently engaged on the Hezbollah issue are those in Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Spain, Switzerland, and the European Parliament itself. Congress could play a very constructive role on this issue by engaging with members in these and other European parliaments to press for some type of national-level action curtailing Hezbollah activities in their countries.

When engaging with European parliamentarians, members of Congress should note other examples of transatlantic cooperation targeting Hezbollah. Operation Cedar, for example, involved law enforcement agencies from Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the United States, and Europol, and led to the arrest and conviction in a Paris court of several Hezbollah operatives and their associates.⁴¹ And both Interpol and Europol are full participants in the Law Enforcement Coordination Group (LECG), coordinated by the State Department, which convened a special meeting in Europe of more than twenty-five governments—plus Europol and Interpol—specifically focused on “countering Hezbollah's terrorist and illicit activities.”⁴²

Conclusion

⁴⁰ “Bipartisan Resolution Urging EU to Designate Hezbollah a Terrorist Organization Introduced,” July 26, 2021, <https://teddeutch.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=403016>.

⁴¹ “Mohammed Nouredinne and Associates Arrested in Operation Cedar,” Lebanese Hezbollah Select Worldwide Activities Map and Timeline, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/#id=598>.

⁴² U.S. Department of State, “Fifth Meeting of the Law Enforcement Coordination Group Focused on Countering Hizballah's Terrorist Activities,” December 14, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/12/276609.htm>.

To be sure, the United States and Europe are intimate partners when it comes to countering terrorist threats (tactical counterterrorism), and both are keen to get better at countering global violent extremism (strategic counterterrorism). Together, the United States and our European allies share not only values but also a sense of collective security.

Moving ahead, this cooperation will need to go beyond critical but tactical issues—like sharing biometric information of known and suspected terrorists and setting up joint task forces—to strategic issues as well. For example, countering violent extremism cannot be tied to any one ideology alone. Today, the world faces threats from a wider array of dangerous actors than at 9/11, to include not only Sunni jihadist threats but those from across the ideological spectrum, including white supremacists, neo-Nazis, anti-government militias, incels, Shia extremists, and more. Nor are these threats unique to any one part of the world. The threats are more geographically dispersed than they were twenty years ago, including rising threats in old arenas like South Asia, new ones like Africa, and—in the context of white supremacist extremism—the West.

In the interests of international security, both the United States and our European partners will have to compromise on complicated issues. Europe, for example, will have to do better on repatriation of foreign terrorist fighter nationals—the situation in detention camps like al-Hawl in Syria is untenable, and it is already becoming a breeding ground for the next generation of violent extremists. America, for its part, must come to terms with the dangers posed by the spread of hate speech, disinformation, and terrorist content online and find ways to address this challenge within First Amendment limits. The Biden administration's decision to join the Christchurch Call is a step in the right direction, but addressing dangerous online content is an issue that demands bipartisan congressional attention.

In short, the United States needs to reinvest in alliances and partnerships to effectively counter global violent extremism, starting with our closest transatlantic partners. Together, we must invest in civilian counterterrorism capacity building and, in an effort to finally get ahead of the radicalization curve, specifically in preventive efforts focused on good governance and healthy societies. We must listen to our allies and partners, understand how they perceive the security threats we aim to address, and find creative ways to navigate around areas of disagreement.