

**Hearing before the U.S. Senate Committee
on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs**

“Threats to the Homeland: Evaluating the Landscape 20 Years After 9/11”

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Thank you, Chairman Peters, Ranking Member Portman, and Members of the Committee for the opportunity to testify before you today. I will focus the balance of my time on an overview of the terrorism landscape as it stands two decades after 9/11, then go into details regarding the threat to both the U.S. Homeland and our interests overseas.

Terrorism Threat Overview

Twenty years after September 11, the United States faces a changed threat from foreign terrorist organizations, or FTOs, that is less acute to the Homeland but which continues to become more ideologically diffuse and geographically diverse. Even as we end America’s longest war in Afghanistan and absorb a broader array of national security priorities, NCTC remains clear-eyed about, and committed to, our mission to detect, disrupt, and deter terrorist efforts to harm the United States, both at home and abroad. The ISIS-Khorasan attack on Hamid Karzai International Airport on August 26 that claimed the lives of 13 heroic U.S. service members and nearly 200 Afghan civilians is a somber reminder that terrorists remain committed to harming the United States.

- The U.S. has continued to make significant progress in the fight against the terrorist organizations that seek to attack us or otherwise undermine our interests. We have degraded the threat to the Homeland from terrorist groups over the past twenty years—by removing key leaders and sustaining pressure against the ability of groups to plot attacks outside their operating areas, move money, and communicate. Even as the threat to the U.S. is changed, those

organizations seeking to do us harm continue to adapt, establishing a presence in more countries around the world with a permissive operating environment—especially in the Middle East and Africa.

- Today, the most pressing terrorist threats to the Homeland come from individuals who are inspired to conduct acts of violence, whether by FTOs or by ideologies that are more domestic in nature. The threat from domestic violent extremists (DVEs)—in particular, racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists, or RMVEs, and militia violent extremists, or MVEs,—has increased since 2015 and will most likely persist, in part because the factors that underpin and aggravate their motivations—like social polarization, negative perceptions about immigration, conspiracy theories promoting violence, and distrust of government institutions—will probably endure. The threat from homegrown violent extremists (HVEs) inspired by groups like al-Qa’ida or ISIS also remain a significant concern.

More than 15 years after its establishment, NCTC is positioned to lead as we move into this next phase of the counterterrorism fight. We will continue to discover, analyze, and warn about ongoing and future terrorist threats as part of a broader set of foreign policy challenges that the United States will face in this century. We will continue finding innovative ways to synthesize, manage, and exploit our unique access to terrorism data across a spectrum of sources to identify threats that otherwise might go unnoticed. Finally, we will continue investing in leading edge technology to stay ahead of our ever-adapting adversaries that power more comprehensive data-informed insights to enhance collaboration.

The Terrorist Threat to the Homeland

As described above, the primary threat in the Homeland comes from individuals inspired to violence, either by FTOs or by other grievances and ideologies.

US-based HVEs, who are mostly inspired by al-Qa’ida or ISIS, will most likely continue to attempt attacks because of their personal and ideological grievances, their attraction to FTO messaging, and their ready access to weapons and targets. HVEs mobilize without specific direction from FTOs and act independently or with few associates, making it extremely difficult to disrupt such attacks. While it is possible that some individuals may draw additional inspiration from developments in Afghanistan, HVEs generally do not conduct attacks in response to singular events.

Despite the degraded threat from FTOs to the Homeland, al-Qa’ida and its affiliates remain intent on using individuals with access to the United States to conduct attacks,

as demonstrated by al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula's probable approval of the 2019 Pensacola, Florida, attack where a Saudi Air Force officer killed three and wounded eight U.S. service members. ISIS also seeks to advance attacks in the Homeland, and NCTC continues to monitor for any threats to the United States that might emanate from ISIS core in Iraq and Syria or its branches, including those in South Asia and Africa. Since 2019, there have been six possible attacks by individuals inspired or enabled by an FTO in the United States, and two of those—including the aforementioned Pensacola attack—resulted in the loss of life.

During the past year, NCTC has continued to support FBI and DHS in better understanding the threats from DVEs. Since 2018, DVEs—who are driven by a range of ideologies—have been the most lethal terrorist threat within the Homeland and will most likely pose an elevated threat during the next few years. Racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists—RMVEs—and militia violent extremists—MVEs—present the most lethal DVE threats, with RMVEs most likely to conduct attacks against civilians and MVEs typically targeting law enforcement and government personnel and facilities. U.S. RMVEs who promote the superiority of the white race are almost certainly the DVE actors with the most persistent and concerning transnational connections because individuals with similar ideological beliefs exist outside the United States, and these RMVEs frequently communicate with and seek to influence each other.

We also remain vigilant regarding Iran's efforts to build operational capability against U.S.-based organizations and people. Several people, including US citizens and Iranians, have been arrested or indicted in the past five years for seeking to build operational capability against US-based organizations and people. Protecting against such threats is even more important now, as Iran, its agents, and proxies plan ways to retaliate against the United States for the January 2020 killing of IRGC-QF Commander Qasem Soleimani. For its part, we assess that Lebanese Hizballah maintains a high threshold for conducting attacks in the Homeland. Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah balances his organization's view of the United States as one of its primary adversaries against the likelihood of U.S. retaliation if the group decided to conduct an attack.

The Terrorist Threat Overseas

Over the past 20 years, our multifaceted offensive and defensive CT operations, along with those of our international partners, have significantly hampered terrorists' ability to strike the Homeland and targets outside their main operating areas, although these groups continue to plot against U.S. interests abroad. However, the underlying drivers of terrorism—such as instability and weak government institutions—continue to present conditions that terrorists exploit, allowing them to spread across a broader swath of

territory than we have witnessed in the past two decades. We assess that ISIS and al-Qa'ida remain the greatest Sunni terrorist threats to U.S. interests overseas. The elements of these groups with at least some capability to threaten the West include especially ISIS core in Iraq and Syria, al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen, and al-Shabaab in Somalia.

ISIS

Moving to ISIS in Iraq and Syria: ISIS remains an intact, centrally led organization that will most likely continue to pose a global threat to U.S. and Western interests. The group remains committed to its long-term goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate and is working toward that goal in the aftermath of territorial losses, waiting until conditions are favorable to begin operating more openly. The core group continues to pursue the same basic strategy that it has followed since its founding as al-Qa'ida in Iraq in 2004: fomenting sectarian discord, eroding confidence in governments, and exploiting security gaps to create conditions favorable for seizing and administering territory. Despite ongoing CT pressure and enduring a number of senior leadership losses during the past year, the structure and cohesion of the group has allowed ISIS to sustain its influence—and, in some areas around the globe, expand on it. ISIS leaders have also prioritized the freeing of thousands of detained members in prisons and internally displaced persons camps across Iraq and Syria, and while not yet successful at scale, any future reintegration would significantly augment the group's operations.

Additionally, ISIS probably maintains the intent to conduct external attacks through a variety of means, including by deploying attackers from the conflict zone, sending operational suggestions virtually to individuals in target countries, and inspiring supporters through their propaganda. Inspired attacks by ISIS supporters will most likely remain the primary ISIS threat to the United States and other western countries. The group will almost certainly continue using its media to encourage supporters to carry out attacks without direction from ISIS leadership, but its degraded propaganda arm will likely hinder its ability to inspire its previous high pace of attacks and bring in new recruits. While we have seen a decline in the number of ISIS-inspired attacks in the West since peaking in 2017, such operations remain a priority for the organization.

Outside Iraq and Syria, ISIS will most likely continue to grow its already robust global enterprise, which includes approximately 20 branches and networks. Although these loyal outposts have varying levels of capability, they provide ISIS with launch points to plan and conduct attacks, recruit, and galvanize supporters and are a source of propaganda that helps sustain the movement. Many of the group's branches and

networks continue to conduct local operations, which ISIS claims in media to dispel the narrative of its defeat. In particular, during the past year, ISIS has had success in growing its presence across large swaths of Africa, as demonstrated by ISIS-Mozambique's temporary seizure in March of a coastal town where foreign workers on the country's largest liquefied natural gas project resided. Notably, we have seen no sign of fissures or splintering by the branches and networks despite the fact that ISIS has not held territory in Iraq or Syria in more than two years.

Al-Qa'ida

Meanwhile, al-Qa'ida and its affiliates around the world remain committed to attacking the Homeland and U.S. interests abroad, although like ISIS, these affiliates have varying degrees of capability and access to Western targets. In the past two years, al-Qa'ida has endured a number of senior leadership losses—including its deputy amir and the heads of three affiliates—that have deprived the organization of charismatic, experienced figures. Despite years of international CT cooperation that has constrained the group's external plotting and helped prevent another attack on the scale of 9/11, the organization has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to evolve, adapt, and capitalize on changing security environments and geopolitical realities to expand its reach.

In Yemen, al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula—is intent on conducting operations in the West and against U.S. and allied interests regionally. In June, al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula published English- and Arabic-language versions of its sixth issue of *Inspire Guide*—its first *Inspire* product since 2017—to provide English-language operational guidance to would-be attackers in the Homeland. We also are concerned that al-Qa'ida elements in northern Syria could use their safe haven in opposition-controlled territory for external attack efforts. In West Africa, we have seen Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin work to expand its operational reach and conduct large-scale, lethal attacks in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, suggesting the group will most likely pose an increasing threat in the region during the next year. For example, in August, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin conducted an exceptionally deadly attack in which 84 military personnel and civilians were killed in Burkina Faso. On the eastern part of the continent, al-Shabaab poses a persistent threat to U.S. citizens and Western interests, as demonstrated by the group's attack last year on a U.S. military base in Kenya that tragically killed three U.S. personnel and the late 2020 federal indictment of a suspected al-Shabaab operative who was part of a plot to hijack a commercial aircraft. Also, in March, the group's amir publicly called for attacks on American and French citizens in Djibouti.

Afghanistan

ISIS and al-Qa'ida both have branches and affiliates in Afghanistan that will require CT vigilance, especially in light of recent developments there. Both groups are intent on attacking U.S. interests both in the region and overseas, although years of sustained CT pressure has degraded their capabilities to project a major external threat to the West. Since the U.S. withdrawal, we have continued to closely monitor for any signs of terrorist plotting that targets the U.S. or our interests abroad. Over the longer term, we suspect these groups could try to take advantage of reduced counterterrorism pressure and a relatively more permissive operating environment to rebuild their capacity to carry out attacks against Western targets. ISIS-Khorasan maintains a steady operational tempo in Afghanistan and retains the ability to execute attacks in cities like Kabul—as we saw tragically on 26 August. While focused against the Taliban, the group's external intentions bear monitoring. Similarly, we continue to closely watch the activities of al-Qa'ida elements in the region because of the group's close ties to the Taliban and its propaganda against the West. After the withdrawal, the group released an official statement congratulating the Taliban for what it called a defeat of the United States. On September 11 this year, al-Qa'ida released a video of group leader Ayman al-Zawahiri praising the Pensacola attacker and claiming that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan proved that the U.S. was defeated.

Of note, NCTC collaborated closely with our military, diplomatic, and intelligence partners in the weeks before the final U.S. forces left Afghanistan, fulfilling our critical role of screening Afghans seeking to relocate to the United States. As of early this month, NCTC and IC partners had screened more than 60,000 individuals evacuated from Afghanistan. Immediately following the fall of Kabul, analysts throughout the Center worked around the clock to screen individuals, monitor reporting, and provide warning of threats during and after evacuation operations.

Iran and Hizballah

Moving to Iran and Lebanese Hizballah, in concert with their terrorist partners and proxies, Iran and Hizballah continue to pose a significant threat to the United States and our allies abroad. Iran views terrorism as a tool to support its core objectives, including projecting power in the Middle East, defending Shia Islam, and deterring its strategic rivals, like the United States and Israel. Iran and aligned groups probably carry out asymmetric and covert attacks to reduce U.S. influence and the U.S. presence in the region, advising both its state allies and proxies. In Iraq, Shia militant groups pose the most immediate threat to U.S. interests. We have seen these militants conduct an

increasing number of indirect fire and, in the past several months, unmanned aerial systems attacks against U.S. facilities with the objective of expelling U.S. forces from the country. In Yemen, Iran has maintained its years-long effort to support Huthi attacks against Saudi Arabia and other targets located in the Gulf, including those involving long-range missiles and UAVs.

The CT Enterprise and the Way Forward

We mark the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks recognizing the remarkable CT successes of the past two decades and with gratitude to the military and to law enforcement, diplomatic, and intelligence professionals, as well as the international partners who made them possible. Working together, we have succeeded in preventing another major, 9/11-style attack on the Homeland.

However, we must not become complacent; the terrorist threat and national security landscape have evolved, and the CT enterprise must evolve as well. NCTC will continue its mission to prevent, detect, and deter threats to the United States and its interests, just as those who founded the Center intended. We will do this as our primary, no-fail mission, enabling other departments and agencies to prioritize resources where necessary to address other challenges, including great power competition and cybersecurity. Going forward, we must consider our CT investments in the context of our broader set of foreign policy objectives and focus our CT enterprise to meet the most immediate terrorism threats of today, all while maintaining an agile, intelligence-driven indications and warning framework that keeps pace with the next evolution of the threat and investing in a Homeland resilience support structure that buttresses our defenses at home.

NCTC and the larger CT enterprise also stayed focused on innovating in an era of rapid technological change. Terrorists, in particular, continue to make technological advances in fields such as encrypted communications and in the use of social media that make detecting threats and discerning significant trends more difficult. We will need to ensure that our data management and exploitation practices; standardization and integration processes for large IC data sets; support for watchlisting and screening efforts; and technical capabilities evolve so we can quickly share information and continue to make sophisticated judgments on the terrorist threat.