

United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs

Annual Threat Assessment to the Homeland

Statement for the Record

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Good morning, Chairman Peters, Ranking Member Portman, and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the overall terrorism landscape, the threat posed to the Homeland and U.S. persons and interests overseas, and the state of the U.S. counterterrorism (CT) enterprise.

U.S. faces a persistent, evolving terrorist threat

Despite significant progress in diminishing the terrorist threat to the United States, the country continues to face a diversified, transnational, and, in many ways, unpredictable threat environment both at home and abroad. An array of actors, whether foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs), state sponsors of terrorism, or lone actors, is shaping the nature of today's terrorism landscape. This persistent threat environment exists amid an ongoing transition for the CT community where CT, while still critical, is one of many competing priorities the U.S. national security community must be postured to address.

Internationally, Russia's invasion of and war in Ukraine, China's growing economic and security assertiveness, Iran's destabilizing activities in the Middle East and beyond, North Korea's confrontational behavior, and the growing capabilities of a number of cyber actors, for example, are among the most consequential challenges to U.S. national security.

At the same time, violent extremism continues to fuel threats against the West from a growing swath of territory from the African Sahel to Southeast Asia and contributes to worsening humanitarian conditions in regions like Afghanistan, Somalia, and Yemen. Notably, this diffusion of the threat, while challenging, has resulted in a less concentrated and effective terrorist capability directed inside the Homeland.

Terrorist organizations such as ISIS and al-Qa'ida and other aligned violent extremists take advantage of developing nations, political instability, and undergoverned territory to entrench themselves in difficult operating environments and ingratiate themselves to local populations. These movements remain committed to attacking U.S. persons and facilities worldwide even as they balance those goals against local gains. These groups represent the most urgent threat to U.S. interests overseas.

In the Homeland, we remain concerned about al-Qa'ida and ISIS threats but assess the threat these groups pose here is less acute than at any other time since 9/11, a judgment consistent with what we expressed last year. In fact, the most likely threat in the United States is from lone actors, whether inspired by violent extremist narratives, racially or ethnically motivated drivers to violence, or other politically motivated violence.

Against the backdrop of this threat landscape, whether overseas or at home, NCTC remains focused on uncovering and disrupting transnational networks from which threats to Americans and America are likely to emerge. Even as we monitor the threat, we also must evaluate the state of the CT community's ability to address it. This role is even more critical as resources shift away from CT and we need to account for the sustained ability to meet the threat, however it evolves.

The main threat inside the United States

Unlike 21 years ago, the American public today is more likely to experience a terrorist attack by an individual attacker than a highly structured terrorist organization. Today's lone-actor threats can mobilize in unpredictable ways based on a variety of motivations. These individuals almost certainly mobilize to violence independently without direction from specific groups.

Since 9/11, there have been 37 attacks in the Homeland inspired by al-Qa'ida or ISIS, compared to eight that involved a direct connection to these groups. Similarly, during the last 12 years, all of the 17 racially or ethnically motivated violent extremist (RMVE) attacks by actors espousing the superiority of the white race were by individuals who radicalized at least in part online and who mobilized to violence as lone actors.

FTOs inspiring lone actors

Even as our concern grows about the threat from U.S.-based RMVEs and other domestic violent extremists, we remain concerned and vigilant regarding the threat from lone actors and small groups inspired by FTOs. Since 2001, the threat emanating from these individuals has evolved from one defined by complex, large-scale attacks directed by an FTO to mostly simple, self-initiated attacks inspired by an FTO. Messaging directed at these individuals to conduct attacks has decreased, although they continue to draw inspiration from historical publications such as al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) *Inspire* magazine or ISIS's messaging directed at these individuals.

Domestic violent extremists

Since 2018, drawing on our significant knowledge of transnational terrorism, NCTC has regularly supported the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to understand the threat in the Homeland posed by domestic violent extremists. Within this category of threat actors, acts of violence by U.S.-based RMVEs, militia violent extremists (MVEs), and anarchist violent extremists (AVEs) stand out. The RMVE threat has the most obvious links to transnational actors whose plots and professed ideology encourage mobilization to violence by those vulnerable to their messaging. The RMVE threat is largely fluid, fragmented, and lacking in hierarchical structures, with proponents framing actions around the concept of leaderless resistance.

U.S.-based RMVEs' linkage to foreign counterparts mostly involves the bidirectional sharing of violent extremist messaging, mutual grievances, manifestos of successful attackers, and encouragement for lone-actor violence, such as by the alleged Buffalo shooter. As with other terrorism challenges, RMVEs anywhere can operate transnationally by exploiting a world connected by social media and other online platforms. Even as technology companies improve their capabilities to detect and respond to violent extremist content online, RMVEs and their supporters find new methods to spread their message.

Additionally, the lethal threat from MVEs remains elevated, primarily toward government and law enforcement personnel. MVEs are willing to use violence to redress perceived government overreach and other sociopolitical grievances, judging from an increase in MVE plotting, disruptions, and FBI investigations since 2020.

AVEs also present a threat of sporadic violent physical assaults and property crimes affecting critical infrastructure most often directed at people or institutions seen as representing authority, capitalism, and oppression. Developments that heighten perceptions of inequality or social injustice might further embolden AVEs to commit acts of violence.

Disrupting terrorist travel and securing the border

In addition to supporting DHS and FBI efforts to disrupt threats inside the United States NCTC also supports efforts to prevent terrorist's infiltration of the Homeland. Identifying known or suspected terrorists or their affiliates who seek to infiltrate U.S. borders by land, sea, or air is central to the U.S. Government's CT strategy. NCTC collaborates regularly with its partners, and on their behalf, state and local partners, to build a common threat picture to enable operating partners to protect the U.S. border. In particular, NCTC continues to support the U.S. Government's screening and vetting enterprise and plays a critical role in refugee and immigration processing by identifying any connections to international terrorism, not only for the applicant, but also appropriate members of the applicant's family.

The terrorist threat overseas continues to evolve

Turning to the overseas environment, foreign terrorist movements worldwide continue to inspire followers and enable attack plotting against the United States, Americans, and other Western countries. ISIS and al-Qa'ida, the two leading foreign terrorist threats to U.S. interests, continue to aspire to attack U.S. and other Western interests but have been more effective at pursuing operations against regional and local adversaries. CT pressure by the United States and foreign partners, during the last 15 years, has been critical in degrading the capability of these groups, particularly in disrupting experienced leaders and operatives and exacting sustained pressure against key networks.

ISIS's global enterprise

ISIS in Iraq and Syria remains an intact, centrally led organization that will most likely continue to pose a global threat to U.S. and other Western interests as well as local populations. Despite losing more than a dozen senior leaders during the past three years, it continues to wage a low-level insurgency in Iraq and Syria since its territorial defeat in 2018 and commands a cohesive global network that has allowed the group to

sustain its influence—and in some areas, such as in Africa, expand its recruitment and operations. We assess that in February, after a raid that killed its overall amir, ISIS transitioned seamlessly to a new amir. ISIS members readily accepted the new leader and we see no signs of fissures or splintering by the branches and networks despite limitations the group faces in Iraq and Syria.

Even under new leadership, ISIS remains committed to its long-term goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate and continues to exploit undergoverned areas in Iraq and Syria, where it currently operates as a clandestine insurgency. This year, ISIS prioritized and attacked a detention facility in northeastern Syria that housed key ISIS leaders and experienced fighters. While we assess most of the high-value detainees were either recaptured or killed as local forces responded to the attack, the operation itself signifies ISIS's ability to stage high-profile attacks and prioritize efforts to replenish its dwindling ranks. We have witnessed subsequent calls and efforts, including by ISIS branches as far away as West Africa, to free imprisoned members. ISIS's capabilities and trajectory will remain dependent upon the level of counterterrorism pressure it faces, particularly by CT actors who continue to routinely disrupt ISIS's facilitation networks and operations.

One of ISIS's primary mechanisms to threaten the West is through its media, even as the group's overall media capabilities have declined from the group's early years. Despite this decline, ISIS's most prolific threat to the United States or other Western countries is through inspired attackers who are vulnerable to influence by ISIS messaging. The group's ability to inspire violence was most recently demonstrated by an ISIS supporter who carried out an attack in Oslo in June, which killed two and injured 21. Pro-ISIS supporter groups have also helped augment ISIS's media presence by creating, archiving, translating, and disseminating multilingual propaganda online. One such group supporting ISIS-Khorasan published English-language media focused on delegitimizing the United States and denigrating the Taliban.

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. The group also still aspires to deploy operatives to the West, and we continue to monitor for threats against high-visibility, attractive regional targets that would have similarly high impact and provide propaganda value and publicity, such as the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. More broadly, ISIS has continued to grow its global enterprise, which now includes approximately 20 branches and networks, through which ISIS leaders' project strength and dispel the narrative of its defeat. In March, ISIS recognized its newest branch—ISIS

in the Sahel—and, in July, the branch claimed responsibility for an attack on Nigeria’s Kuje prison—located 27 miles away from the U.S. Embassy—in which almost 1,000 prisoners were released, including some terrorists.

ISIS has also used its branches and networks to choreograph global attack campaigns since 2019, the most recent of which was in April to avenge the death of the group’s overall amir. ISIS in Iraq and Syria led in the number of attack claims and were boosted by ISIS–West Africa and ISIS-Khorasan, the branches we consider to be among the group’s most capable.

This year, ISIS-Khorasan expanded its ambitions outside Afghanistan with a handful of cross-border rocket attacks against Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and a foiled plot in India. Its ambitions for attacking the West—possibly including the Homeland—remains a top intelligence priority, notwithstanding the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan last August.

ISIS is also exploiting uneven local CT pressure in Central, East, and Southern Africa to expand its presence, increase connectivity, and develop new capabilities beyond its traditional strongholds in North and West Africa. ISIS’s expansion in Mozambique increasingly threatens Western-led energy projects there, while signs of ISIS’s influence in the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Africa, and elsewhere in the region demonstrate the group’s growing appeal across the continent.

Al-Qa’ida post-Zawahiri

The death of al-Qa’ida’s longtime leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, this past July in Kabul, Afghanistan, dealt an important strategic and symbolic blow to the al-Qa’ida network, which he led from relative isolation for more than a decade. Zawahiri was a respected ideological leader among the al-Qa’ida global network who strove to enhance interconnectivity across al-Qa’ida’s dispersed regional affiliates. The network now finds itself without an obvious leader, but how quickly it will adapt to Zawahiri’s loss remains to be seen.

Three months past the operation that killed him, the group has yet to publicly announce a successor. Among the remaining al-Qa’ida veterans are several Iran-based senior leaders, most notably Sayf al-’Adl and Abd-al-Rahman al-Maghrebi, who probably continue to provide ideological and strategic guidance to the global network. We expect

they both will continue to have important roles in the years ahead, despite the irony of their location in Iran, another of al-Qa'ida's sworn enemies. Other, less prominent al-Qa'ida leaders—who have been featured in globally and regionally focused media—are in charge of the regional affiliates and likely consult across a distributed leadership team about the direction of the al-Qa'ida network.

Al-Qa'ida's global network

Al-Qa'ida's Iran-based senior leaders oversee the global network, which includes regional affiliates in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia as well as various local networks that support the affiliates.

Starting in West Africa, al-Qa'ida's Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam al-Muslimin (JNIM) is increasingly threatening capital cities in the Sahel while combatting local militaries, ISIS's Sahel province, and Russian paramilitary forces in Mali. In July of this year, the group attacked Mali's largest military camp, located just outside of Bamako, underscoring both its capabilities and growing boldness in the region. JNIM probably hopes to exploit the departure of French forces from Mali earlier this year to accelerate its growth and entrenchment, including into littoral West African states such as Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, and Togo. CT concerns in the region have further led to instability fueling nondemocratic transitions of power, most recently last month in Burkina Faso.

In the Horn of Africa, we remain concerned about the continued threat that al-Shabaab poses to U.S. citizens and Western interests. Al-Shabaab is the wealthiest and most lethal of all al-Qa'ida affiliates, controls large portions of southern Somalia, and has demonstrated the capability to carry out successful operations across the region, including against U.S. service members.

In North Africa, al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has experienced setbacks from CT pressure since early 2018, but probably provides guidance to other al-Qa'ida elements in the region, particularly JNIM. As of 2020, Algerian Yazid Mebrak was serving as AQIM's leader and was playing a key role in al-Qa'ida's management of global operations, including the abductions and killing of Americans.

Turning to the Middle East and Yemen, AQAP is intent on conducting operations in the West and against U.S. and allied regional interests. It has proven itself to be among the

al-Qa'ida network's most creative branches but has faced significant CT pressure in recent years, creating hurdles for the group's external operations planning.

In June 2021, AQAP published its sixth issue of *Inspire Guide*, which provides operational guidance for would-be attackers in the Homeland and suggests the group still maintains a viable media capability, despite the death last year of its key propagandist.

In Syria, al-Qa'ida elements under the banner of Hurras al-Din have struggled to stabilize their footing and experienced numerous leadership losses and pressure from rival group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. However, these elements could use their traditional safe haven in opposition-controlled territory to target U.S. and other Western interests in the region.

Finally, in Afghanistan, al-Qa'ida's South Asia affiliate, al-Qa'ida in the Indian Sub-continent (AQIS), is the weakest group in the organization's global network. Al-Qa'ida remains intent on striking U.S. interests and inspiring its followers to do so but currently lacks a capability to direct attacks against the United States from Afghanistan. Separate from AQIS, there are probably fewer than a dozen al-Qa'ida legacy members with historical ties to the group located in Afghanistan, and some may have been there prior to the fall of Kabul; we have no indication that these legacy members remaining in Afghanistan are involved in external attack plotting.

Iranian threat to the United States

Transitioning to threats emanating from Iran and its partners and proxies, Iran continues to encourage and support plots against the United States at home and abroad, especially in the Middle East. Iran and Lebanese Hizballah have remained intent on retaliating for the death of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) Commander Soleimani, with Iran plotting attacks against former U.S. officials.

Iran is pursuing a diverse campaign that employs legal, financial, and lethal action in pursuit of its revenge. Tehran has publicly threatened to conduct lethal operations including against former President Donald Trump and former Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, and has recently increased its threats of lethal action in the Homeland. In August 2022, an Iran-based IRGC member was charged with attempting to arrange the murder of former National Security Advisor John Bolton in the United States.

Iran also pursues a campaign against anti-Iranian regime dissidents around the world, including in the United States. In July 2021, U.S. law enforcement charged an Iranian intelligence official and four others with attempting to kidnap an Iranian-American journalist in New York and forcibly returning her to Iran. At the end of July 2022, a man with a loaded assault weapon was arrested after behaving suspiciously outside the same journalist's home.

Iran has also demonstrated its willingness to engage in terrorism in the Middle East, as evidenced in June when Turkish authorities arrested members of an Iranian cell planning to kidnap and assassinate Israeli citizens in Istanbul. The plot was intended as retaliation for an alleged Israeli operation in Tehran. Separately, Iran-backed militants in Iraq and Syria target U.S. forces with unmanned aircraft systems and indirect fire attacks as they try to compel their withdrawal from the region.

Evolving the CT enterprise

The complexity of the threat just outlined continues to demand a collaborative, agile, and appropriately resourced CT effort to mitigate terrorist threats to the United States. In the twenty-one years since 9/11, the U.S. Government has developed just that: a highly integrated, innovative, and successful CT enterprise that continues to adapt to the nature of the threat. CT practitioners work behind the scenes every day to ensure that interconnected CT operations and programs are effectively used and employ a wide range of tools, including identity intelligence, diplomatic security, sanctions, law enforcement investigations, high-value target operations, and partner capacity building efforts.

Even as other priorities demand attention from the U.S. national security community, CT remains foundational to our national security. The CT enterprise must preserve CT fundamentals—such as collection, warning, analysis, disruption, information sharing, and key partnerships—that ultimately give the national security community the time and space to focus on non-CT priorities. NCTC and its CT partners throughout the U.S. Government are working toward a sustainable and enduring level of support to this mission that maintains our strategic success and creates space for investments in other national security priorities.

CT in a time of competing priorities requires very purposeful and transparent decisions about when and where resource shifts can be made to retain as much of the hallmark

interconnectivity and efficiency of the CT community as possible. The goal is to work with Congress to realize efficiencies while preserving the core capabilities required for the enduring mission. A key task for the CT community is ensuring those decisions are made deliberately and with a clear understanding as to the impact across the CT enterprise.

Looking ahead

Maintaining an efficient and effective CT architecture is an ongoing mission, and our progress during the past 21 years has been a whole-of-government effort, enabled by Congress' support. As we look to posture for evolving threats and national security priorities, we must ensure that we capitalize on the CT infrastructure and relationships built since 9/11 in support of other national security efforts. An interconnected threat environment fueled by great power competition, regional conflicts, and humanitarian emergencies has the potential to escalate threats quickly. We must ensure that our CT enterprise, including our international and U.S.-based partners, retains the ability to stop threats and to stay abreast of a continually evolving threat picture.

Let me end by thanking the incredible community of intelligence, diplomatic, military, and law enforcement professionals whose dedication to the CT mission has done so much to protect this country and its citizens from a persistent and amorphous adversary. It is a privilege to be part of today's CT enterprise and to work on behalf of the American people.