

**Deputy Assistant Secretary for Counterterrorism Joel Borkert's
Written Testimony for the House Foreign Relations Committee's
Subcommittee on Middle East and North Africa**

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Chairman Lawler, Ranking Member Sherman, and members of the Subcommittee—thank you for the opportunity to appear today.

Twenty-five years ago this week, I was a senior in college. September 11 changed me forever. Within months, I commissioned as an infantry officer, and that morning set the course for the next 20 years of my life.

That is true for a whole generation of Americans. We deployed. Most came home, but some did not. Twenty-five years later, I measure our work against what it cost to get here.

The Department of State has been in this fight longer than most people realize. We stood up our first counterterrorism office in 1972. Congress wrote the Coordinator position into law in 1994. And in 2012, it became the Bureau of Counterterrorism.

We got a number of things right. We assembled a global coalition. We took away the sanctuary al Qaeda used to plan those attacks. We destroyed the ISIS caliphate and killed al-Baghdadi, al-Zawahiri, bin Laden, and many of their associates. And we built a counterterrorism architecture designed to stop attacks before they happen. By God's grace, our Nation has not suffered another attack on the scale of September 11.

But we also got some things wrong. We sometimes measured effort instead of effect. We stood up partner forces we could not sustain. We treated counterterrorism as a permanent condition rather than a means of solving a specific problem. And suffered from mission creep.

Today, we face a fundamentally different terrorist landscape than we did 25 years ago. President Trump's counterterrorism strategy recognizes that change and puts the American homeland first, with a focus on identifying threats before they happen and targeting those with the intent and capability to harm Americans. While

we have significantly degraded the threat from global radical Islamic terrorist organizations, it persists—fueled by Iran’s support for terrorist proxies and Salafi-jihadist groups exploiting weak borders and fragile states. At the same time, narcoterrorism has devastated American communities and families, contributing to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Americans. And the threat of far-left terrorism has reemerged, targeting the institutions, ideals, and principles at the foundation of our constitutional republic, as well as the lives and decisions of American people who they seek to coerce or silence.

Terrorists have adapted and are using new technologies. Advances in AI, drones, and digital assets have reduced their dependence on traditional camps and safe havens to radicalize, recruit, finance, and inspire. Today, small cells—and even a single individual—can achieve effects that once required disciplined organizations, extensive resources, and physical sanctuary. Terrorist groups can also spot, recruit, radicalize, and direct individuals around the globe through interactive media, games, messages, and other forms of cyberspace connectivity.

The lessons of the last 25 years are clear. So are many of the threats we face today. The President’s National Security Strategy and Counterterrorism Strategy reflect that reality: Protect the American homeland first. Identify threats before they happen. Act with precision over permanence. And expect capable partners to carry their fair share of the burden.

I am proud of the critical role the Department of State—and especially the dedicated men and women of the Bureau of Counterterrorism under Ambassador LoGerfo’s leadership—plays in advancing the President’s counterterrorism priorities.

First, we put the strategy into action by focusing on the homeland and working outward. That means confronting the threats closest to home. We have secured our border. And at President Trump’s direction from his inaugural speech, we are designating cartels and gangs as terrorist organizations, bringing the full weight of our counterterrorism architecture to bear. Under President Trump and Secretary Rubio’s leadership, we have designated twenty-one cartels and transnational criminal organizations as Foreign Terrorist Organizations or Specially Designated Global Terrorists. That means more than prosecutions and asset freezes. It means equipping capable partners to dismantle these organizations before their violence

reaches American communities. The Strategy calls for prioritizing these hemispheric threats and using the full range of counterterrorism tools to disrupt their financing, logistics, and access to the United States. This year alone, our counterterrorism assistance to the Western Hemisphere has increased markedly in line with these priorities.

Second, we focus on high-payoff efforts that stop terrorists before they reach our borders. By sharing terrorist screening and traveler information and strengthening aviation and border security, we push our defenses outward. A single watchlist hit at a foreign airport can stop a terrorist before they ever board a plane—at a fraction of the cost of deploying military forces.

Third, strong partners are force multipliers for American security. That is why we are mobilizing partners to shoulder their share of the fight. Against Iran, we are applying the same principle: deny the regime and its proxies the resources that sustain their terrorist networks. NSPM-2 directs a sustained campaign to disrupt, degrade, and deny the IRGC and its surrogates access to the resources that sustain their activities, while using financial pressure and diplomacy to isolate Iran. We are also leading efforts with partners to combat far-left terrorism—strengthening detection and information sharing so today’s violence does not grow into a threat that jeopardizes the fundamental values and freedoms we too often take for granted.

And finally, we are maximizing coordination, efficiency, and effectiveness for the threats we face today and tomorrow. The reorganization has strengthened our ability to coordinate across the Department and interagency, eliminate redundancy, and demand results—ensuring that every program, every dollar, and every partnership makes America safer, stronger, and more prosperous.

That brings me back to where I started.

I am often asked what we learned from 9/11. Two of the hijackers were known to this government but not on a watchlist. Today, our watchlist system is greatly improved and designed to make that kind of failure far less likely.

I have devoted the past 25 years of my life to helping ensure this country would never suffer an attack like that again.

This summer, my son will commission as an Army officer. He was not alive on September 11, but he inevitably inherits this mission. My obligation—and, I would respectfully submit, our obligation—is to hand him a country that does not have to learn this lesson twice.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.