

D/NCTC Statement for the Record (SFR)

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

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WORLDWIDE THREAT HEARING

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Good morning, Chairman Garbarino, Ranking Member Thompson, and distinguished members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the terrorism threat landscape and the state of the US counterterrorism (CT) enterprise. I am pleased to be joined by The Honorable Kristi Noem from the Department of Homeland Security and XXX from the Federal Bureau of Investigation who are essential partners in the counterterrorism fight and defending the Homeland and our borders.

For more than two decades, the CT enterprise has worked tirelessly to defend the American people from traditional terrorist threats posed by Salafi jihadist groups and the individuals inspired by this ideology. We have had success countering the threats from these groups through persistent CT operations against key ISIS and al-Qa'ida nodes, including strikes by the U.S. military in Syria and Somalia, and maintaining pressure that impedes the groups' ability to threaten us at home and abroad. Despite these successes, the terrorism threat remains. The current threat landscape is complex and constantly evolving, changing the way NCTC and the rest of the CT enterprise must orient our mission to keep Americans safe from all terrorist threats in whatever form they arise.

Fighting all terrorism must now include stopping cartels and gangs from crossing our borders, trafficking drugs and humans, and directly contributing to the deaths of tens of thousands of Americans every year. We cannot allow these transnational criminal organizations to threaten our country and propagate violence on our border.

Against this backdrop, I'll describe how NCTC is understanding and responding to the threat that designated cartels and gangs pose to the Homeland, address ISIS, al-Qa'ida, and Iran and Iranian-backed militia intents and capabilities to target the United States at home and abroad, and highlight the critical work of the U.S. Government's CT enterprise.

THREATS FROM THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE

The President's Executive Order on Designating Cartels and Other Organizations as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Global Terrorists highlights the growing threat that international cartels and other transnational criminal organizations have posed to the U.S. for far too long. The Executive Order and follow-on designations named 14 total Mexico-based cartels and transnational gangs as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) and Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGTs)—enabling NCTC to address these groups' campaigns of violence and terror with the full force and resources of the CT enterprise.

Mexico-based cartels have flooded the United States with illicit drugs—including fentanyl, heroin, methamphetamine, and cocaine that threaten the health and safety of Americans daily. In 2024, cartels directly contributed to the approximately 52,000 deaths from synthetic opioids in the United States. In addition to producing and trafficking drugs, the cartels maintain extensive global networks to further their wide-ranging illicit activities, including but not limited to money laundering; fuel theft; human trafficking and smuggling; extortion; and violent attacks on innocent civilians, Mexican Government personnel, and rival cartels.

In addition to Mexico-based cartels, NCTC is focused on countering terrorist gangs contributing to violence in the United States and abroad that destabilize communities in Latin America, driving migration to the United States, and creating instability near our borders. Tren de Aragua and MS-13 primarily operate through small, decentralized cells spread throughout Central and South America as well as the United States. Though we have not observed these terrorist gangs plotting high-profile attacks against U.S. targets or expressing the intent to do so, their human trafficking and smuggling, extortion, sex trafficking, and drug smuggling make them a threat to the American people.

As NCTC takes on a greater role in countering the narcotics threat, we are committed to working seamlessly with our partners in the CT community to identify and disrupt the networks that support these organizations. Since February, NCTC has trained over 1,500 officers across 13 U.S. agencies on U.S. watchlisting, including officers not traditionally involved in watchlisting who now have access to critical information that can help dismantle drug and cartel networks. Additionally, NCTC has provided intelligence that has led to U.S. law enforcement arresting cartel leaders, including the August arrest of a Sinaloa cartel leader at the southern border.

NCTC is able to provide actionable leads to our operational partners in large part thanks to the NCTC Intelligence Fusion Center (NIFC), which supports the Homeland Security Task Forces' (HSTF) efforts to dismantle networks operating in the United States. The NIFC's main goals are to share information among law enforcement agencies and the Intelligence Community (IC) on FTO-designated cartels and gangs; identify, vet, and provide an intelligence driven prioritization of high-impact targets from these FTO-designated cartels and gangs; provide new operational leads for law enforcement as discovered via correlated data analysis, and review of new information lawfully acquired through law enforcement actions; and provide ad hoc RFI support for HSTFs. In support of our operational partners, NCTC has completed 161 identity intelligence support tasks from April to the end of August; released 35 lead cables to

provide intelligence-driven support to investigations or alert law enforcement partners of potential new investigative leads; and authored 41 strategic products, including Currents, lethal capability and known and suspected terrorist profiles, SITREP comments, and CT Updates.

INSPIRED AND LONE ACTOR ATTACKERS CONTINUE TO THREATEN AMERICANS

In the Homeland, the greatest Sunni terrorism threat comes from U.S.-based lone offenders, like the Colorado attacker in June. These individuals take inspiration from foreign terrorist ideologies and propaganda, and are sometimes motivated by world events, such as the Israel-HAMAS conflict. These individuals' ability to mobilize with little warning and their radicalization from sometimes multiple ideologies challenges our ability to identify and warn of these threats in a timely manner.

NCTC consistently collaborates across the CT enterprise to mitigate any threats to the Homeland, including the movement and possible residual threats of individuals who have evaded scrutiny and entered the Homeland over the last four years. Through the Center's work, we identified approximately 400 individuals who entered the U.S. with help from ISIS-linked facilitators, and an additional 1,200 asylees with possible terrorist ties. The potential risk such individuals represent was illustrated this time last year when a Mauritanian national who illegally entered the country and claimed asylum conducted a terrorist attack against a Jewish individual and first responders in Chicago.

- The most recent example of this type of the threat tragically manifested the day before Thanksgiving, with an attack on National Guardsmen in Washington, DC. The attacker, Afghan national Rahmanullah Lakanwal, entered the U.S. during Operation Allies Welcome (OAW) following the fall of Afghanistan in 2021. We have not uncovered derogatory information pertaining to Lakanwal after his arrival to the U.S., suggesting he radicalized after entering the Homeland.
- The last Afghan national we observed coordinating attack plotting in the U.S. was an Oklahoma City-based attack aspirant [Nasir Ahmad Tawhedi] who sought ISIS-Khorasan's assistance in planning an assault against voters on election day 2024.

We also remain concerned by the susceptibility of juveniles to terrorist narratives that justify and encourage violence and are working with federal, state, and local partners to identify and mitigate terrorism trends that are fueling youth terrorist plotting.

Al-Qa'ida and ISIS remain committed to spreading its messages to audiences in the Homeland as an effort to increase its global reach. This summer, al-Qa'ida praised the attack on a Jewish event here in Washington D.C. and celebrated the attack in Colorado in its official media soon after the events occurred. ISIS's ability to inspire attacks was devastatingly felt on New Year's Eve, when a U.S.-born attacker in New Orleans used tactics previously promoted by the group to kill 15 people amid holiday celebrations. This showcases the group's persistent intent to exploit events in the U.S. to fuel anti-U.S. sentiment and incite continued violence.

THREATS FROM THE MIDDLE EAST

Despite persistent CT pressure, groups like al-Qa'ida and ISIS strive to rebuild their capabilities and remain intent on conducting attacks against U.S. interests in the Homeland and abroad. Al-Qa'ida continues to exploit political instability and under-governed territory – relying on its five affiliate groups to expand its territorial control, build ties with local populations, and conduct outreach to new terrorism partners such as the Houthis. Al-Qa'ida's affiliate in Yemen, al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, is probably the affiliate most focused on encouraging and enabling such attacks, and remains dedicated to external plotting. ISIS continues to use its global enterprise to project strength, distribute resources, and dispel the narrative of ISIS' defeat—but its greatest threat to the West currently is its ability to inspire supporters to attack on its behalf.

Last December, opposition groups led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) overthrew the Asad regime, forming a new government with leaders who are mostly HTS members. The new government in Damascus has conducted raids against both ISIS and Lebanese Hizballah, but has struggled to stop all terrorist attacks. A stable and unified Syria hinges on the Syrian government's ability to contain sectarian unrest and prevent the infiltration of jihadist elements into its security services. Predictably, ISIS is exploiting this uncertain security environment to expand its operations and capabilities.

Turning to Iran, the fall of the Asad regime in Syria also deprived Iran and its Axis of Resistance of a key ally and logistics node for projecting its power throughout the Middle East. The Axis has suffered recent losses, but maintain their ability to threaten the US and our allies in the region. Hizballah and HAMAS' military capabilities have been severely degraded since 7 October 2023, but both groups are probably still able to conduct acts of terrorism both in and outside the region.

The Houthis are refraining from attacking Israel in accordance with the Gaza ceasefire agreement and are upholding their May ceasefire with the United States. The threat to U.S. interests from Iran' proxies is most concerning in Iraq and Syria, where the IRGC-QF enables Iraqi militias to conduct rocket and UAS attacks against U.S. facilities and personnel. These groups continue to build their arsenals, enabling more frequent and farther-reaching attacks.

Finally, Iran has proven capable of developing lethal operations against U.S. persons both in the United States and abroad. Iran maintains its long-term strategic intent to avenge the death of former IRGC-QF Commander Qasem Soleimani by targeting current and former U.S. officials. At the same time, Iran persists in its efforts to counter perceived regime threats emanating from Israel and regime critics by targeting Israeli and Jewish interests and Iranian dissidents.

THREATS FROM ASIA

Al-Qa’ida’s ability to threaten the United States from Afghanistan or Pakistan probably remains at its lowest point since the group relocated to Afghanistan from Sudan in 1996. While al-Qa’ida maintains the intent to strike U.S. interests, it currently lacks the capability to direct attacks outside of South Asia from Afghanistan. Al-Qa’ida has lost target access, leadership talent, group cohesion, rank-and-file commitment, and an accommodating local environment.

Earlier this year, the group’s regional affiliate, al-Qa’ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), adopted the moniker Harkat-e Inqilab-e Islami Pakistan and allied itself with two Pakistani groups to conduct attacks in Pakistan. AQIS’s media continues to explicitly call for attacks against the U.S. and its allies in an attempt to inspire attacks outside South Asia.

With respect to ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K), the Taliban continues to take action to counter the group, which the regime perceives as the primary threat to internal security. ISIS-K has claimed eight attacks to date in Afghanistan compared to 18 during the same time frame last year, suggesting the Taliban’s counterterrorism pressure is having some success against the group.

THREATS FROM AFRICA

Africa has increasingly become a focal point for the global Sunni jihadist movement. ISIS and al-Qa’ida have exploited rapidly shifting political and security dynamics to sow violence and instability, and have expanded their presence among vulnerable populations.

ISIS-Somalia has endured recent CT pressure and is sustaining its operational activity. The branch serves as a logistical and financial hub for ISIS, raising millions of dollars annually through local extortion, and transferring some of those funds to the group’s global enterprise.

ISIS-West Africa and ISIS-Sahel present a potent threat to local security forces and civilian populations, particularly in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mali Niger, and Nigeria. The branches have increased the intensity of their attacks—especially against local security forces—in the past year, and have expanded their area of operations, moving closer to cities with larger U.S. presences.

Meanwhile, ISIS branches in Central Africa are working to expand their presence outside of Mozambique and eastern Democratic Republic of Congo despite intermittent CT pressure, targeting local security services and civilians.

Deaths from the al-Qa’ida-aligned group Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) are at their highest level since the group’s emergence in 2017. JNIM regularly attacks local security forces, their partners, and rival terrorist groups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and to a lesser extent in Niger, Benin, and Togo. JNIM’s continued expansion across the Sahel and into coastal West Africa underscores the long-term security challenges the group poses, as well as the sustained threat to Americans in the region.

Al-Qa'ida's affiliate al-Shabaab is responsible for the most high-profile and lethal attacks in the region, and poses a direct threat to U.S. interests in Kenya and Somalia

The U.S. faces persistent challenges countering terrorist activity in Africa, including a reduced Western CT footprint, renewed fighting between separatist groups and government forces in multiple countries, and intensifying violence across the continent.

INNOVATING TO KEEP AMERICA SAFE

We must remain vigilant and invest in a sustainable CT approach to keep Americans safe moving forward. For NCTC, this boils down to modernizing how we execute our core mission.

The first way we do this is by excelling at threat integration and analysis, serving as the U.S. Government's premier all-source terrorism analytic component. We view CT as a no-fail mission, and integrating disparate pieces of foreign and domestic intelligence to identify and analyze threats is central to warning policymakers and enabling plot disruption at home and abroad. As we process increasingly large amounts of classified and unclassified threat data, we are exploring ways to integrate machine learning and artificial intelligence to accelerate analysis of large datasets and identify efficiencies in basic business practices to free up officers' time to focus on more in-depth analysis.

Additionally, central to NCTC's mission are NCTC's Regional Representatives, a handful of senior officers stationed across the country to facilitate the sharing of CT intelligence and analytic products, provide training, and—at the request of FBI—support terrorism investigations with a foreign nexus. NCTC Regional Representatives have expanded their partnerships to include working with Homeland Security Task Forces, DEA, HSI and others working to counter cartels and gangs. Currently we have NCTC officers serving alongside interagency counterparts near the US-Mexico border to ensure our partners have access to NCTC data and analysis to support their investigations and operations.

NCTC has been working vigilantly with our IC partners to counter the threat of terrorist groups exploiting our borders, including making strategic investments in identity intelligence and screening and vetting—our nation's last line of defense against terrorists seeking to infiltrate our borders. In the past few years, the CT community has become more integrated and more effective in screening and vetting, thanks in large part to the implementation of the National Vetting Center (NVC) in 2019. Importantly, the NVC ensures intelligence is accessible in a consolidated and timely manner, strengthening the way intelligence and law enforcement information is used to secure our borders.

NCTC remains an integral part of America's screening and vetting enterprise. Since January, NCTC has identified and provided leads to law enforcement on nearly 3,500 individuals with ties to MS-13, Tren de Aragua, and the Sinaloa Cartel as part of our screening and vetting mission. As we modernize our screening and vetting support capabilities, we are working to more effectively integrate the large amount of identity intelligence data, including a growing amount of biometrics data, to deliver the most accurate results faster to support the U.S.

Government's terrorist watchlisting, screening, and vetting enterprise. The investments we are making to our screening and vetting mission are particularly important as we approach the 2026 FIFA World Cup hosted by the United States, Mexico, and Canada; we are expecting an increase in border encounters and are diligently monitoring for any threats posed by travelers and teams.

NCTC protects the United States through mission management-centric strategic operational planning functions that drive whole-of-government actions to achieve our national CT objectives. NCTC's Directorate of Strategic Operational Planning executes this mission and strives to unify the CT enterprise and strengthen its agility and resilience by informing the policy, capability, and resource decisions of strategic leaders and operational partners. The Directorate provides holistic insights to strategically coordinate activities; assess, validate, and articulate requirements; ensure an anticipatory posture for warning; and identify, address, and close gaps.

CONCLUSION

NCTC's role in continuously evaluating and assessing the worldwide terrorist threat enables the CT community to focus its efforts on keeping the United States safe from the myriad terrorist threats we face. We will continue to work tirelessly to identify and disrupt terrorist plots, and to support our partners in the CT community.

Thank you for your continued support of the CT enterprise. I am honored to be part of this effort and look forward to working with you to keep our nation safe.
