

Hearing before the House Committee on Homeland Security
“Global Terrorism: Threats to the Homeland”

Mr. Russell Travers

Acting Director, National Counterterrorism Center

Office of the Director of National Intelligence

October 30, 2019

Thank you, Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Rogers, and members of the committee, for the opportunity to be with you today. I will begin with a brief overview of the terrorism threat before discussing homeland and overseas threats in more detail. I will close my opening remarks with a discussion of global trends impacting counterterrorism efforts, along with comments on the way forward, from NCTC’s perspective.

Terrorism Threat Overview

The US and its allies continue to pursue an aggressive global campaign against a complex array of terrorist actors. Operating across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, US and partner forces have killed or captured thousands of terrorist leaders and operatives since September 11th, exemplified this past weekend in the heroic removal of the brutal ISIS in Iraq and Syria leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. These removals degrade the ability of terrorists to organize, communicate, and strike the US. Working unilaterally or with partner-nations, the US has disrupted numerous attack plots, saving the lives of countless potential victims. At home, federal, state, and local intelligence and law enforcement agencies—working in close cooperation—continue to counter terrorist activity. Enhanced border security efforts have constrained groups’ ability to infiltrate the US, and we now assess the most predominant terrorist threat to the Homeland to emanate from US-based lone actors. Additionally, the US government and private sector allies have made significant strides curtailing terrorists’ online presence.

While these efforts have diminished the terrorist threat to the US, we have enjoyed less success staunching terrorist growth overseas. Over a year ago, NCTC warned that the terrorist threat was becoming more diverse, dispersed, and unpredictable; unfortunately,

these trends have only continued, posing an increasingly complex challenge for the US and its allies. In several regions, we continue to observe the expansion or revival of familiar threats, as well as the emergence of new ones.

- First, the overall threat from radical Islamic terrorists has not abated and, in some regions, is growing. Prominent groups including ISIS and al-Qa'ida are expanding into new areas and reinforcing their networks' cohesion, bolstering the overall movement's reach, resiliency, and threat to US interests.
- At the same time, the US is confronting an aggressive Iran and its network of terrorist proxies, who are employing violence to undermine US pressure and influence throughout the Middle East. Tehran, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF), and its formidable allies like Lebanese Hizballah are strengthening their relationships with a wide array of militants and exporting advanced tactics and weaponry – capabilities that can be turned against US personnel with little warning.
- Finally, high profile attacks in the United States and abroad—most notably the March attacks against mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand and the August attack in El Paso, TX—highlight that the US is facing threats from a broader range of terrorist actors, to include violent extremists motivated by racial and ethnic hatred. While primarily a lone actor threat, these violent extremists in the US and abroad are deftly using technology to recruit others to their extreme ideology.

Several broader global trends are adding to the complexity of the terrorist threat landscape including the availability of disruptive technologies, enduring conflicts and instability, the drift of focus and resources away from CT, and the rising global influence of US competitors. These concurrent and interrelated dynamics are increasingly affecting—at times negatively—our ability to mobilize or sustain effective pressure against terrorists. In this environment, staying ahead of terrorist adaptation requires an increasingly nimble US response that better leverages foreign allies, private sector partners, and whole-of-government resources.

The Terrorist Threat to the Homeland

Throughout 2019, persistent US and allied CT pressure against key al-Qa'ida and ISIS leaders and operatives have continued to degrade these groups' ability to launch terrorist attacks against the US. Radical Islamist terrorists' external plotting capabilities

may have been further hampered by the demands of sustaining large-scale insurgent campaigns, combatting capable local US allies, or fighting other militant competitors.

Despite our successes, leaders of both al-Qa'ida and ISIS retain the intent to strike the US and have proven resourceful in finding ways to evade US defenses. I would refer to the example of al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) which, while fighting an insurgency in Yemen, nevertheless attempted three external operations against US aviation between 2009 and 2012 using novel explosive designs. Currently, al-Qa'ida, ISIS, and several of their local affiliates and branches retain key competencies and resources—including explosives expertise and foreign operatives—that could support attacks in the US or the West. Further declines in CT pressure could enable them to quickly reinvigorate or expand external plotting. This could include additional attacks against aviation, which remains of great interest to terrorists because of the potential economic and psychological impacts.

As we sustain pressure against radical Islamic terrorists' external operations capabilities, we will likely continue to face a more persistent threat from US-based homegrown violent extremists, which we assess represent the preeminent Sunni terrorist threat to the US. While there has only been one such attack in the US this year, it remains a serious threat and poses an enduring detection challenge because of these attackers' lack of direct connections to known violent extremists or terrorist groups, their use of easy-to-acquire weapons and tactics and tendency to operate alone or in small groups. In addition, radical Islamist terrorist groups overseas continue to promote lone actor attacks through their media outlets, viewing them as an efficient tactic to terrorize the US and other opponents.

The threat from terrorists motivated by ideologies unconnected to the radical Islamist terrorism are also a concern. Since the beginning of 2018, these terrorists have conducted the vast majority of lethal homeland terrorist attacks. Most of these attacks were perpetrated by lone actors adhering to a racially or ethnically motivated violent extremist ideology who have been radicalized, in part online, and motivated by a range of grievances associated with political and/or social agendas. While most of these actors have used readily available firearms and edged weapons against soft targets, 2019 has been the most lethal year for these attacks since 1995.

Finally, Iran and Hizballah's ongoing efforts to expand their already robust global networks also threaten the homeland. The arrests last year of Iranian operatives and diplomats in the US and Europe linked to attack plotting underscore Tehran's determination to use violence against its adversaries around the world, potentially including within the US. Additionally, the arrest in July of a Hizballah-trained operative in

New Jersey who conducted surveillance of US landmarks on behalf of the group is emblematic of the reach of its sophisticated global network, which has been active in Europe, South America, and Africa.

The Terrorist Threat Overseas

While our CT campaign has diminished terrorists' external attack capabilities, our efforts to curtail radical Islamic terrorist growth and the threat to US interests overseas have proven less successful. Radical Islamic terrorist groups are now operating in more countries around the world than ever before, threatening a widening circle of US interests and allies.

I will begin with ISIS in Iraq and Syria, where US and coalition efforts have eliminated the physical caliphate and removed the group's long-time leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, demoralizing ISIS fighters and demonstrating the persistence of US and coalition forces to eliminate terrorist threats wherever they are. However, the terrorism threat persists as ISIS has successfully transitioned to a clandestine insurgency consisting of thousands of committed operatives across the two countries. ISIS cells continue to conduct a diminished but steady rate of IED attacks, raids, and ambushes against local security forces and other opponents. ISIS fighters are attempting to evade local counterterrorism pressure by using safehavens in rural, under-governed areas of northern and western Iraq and eastern Syria. Senior leaders have publically encouraged adherents to be patient and persevere, pointing to the group's previous successes rebounding from setbacks.

In an effort to enable its revival and attract new recruits, the group continues to stoke and exploit Sunni fears of sectarian violence and economic and political marginalization while targeting populations vulnerable to ISIS's appeals, including refugees. ISIS leaders since at least mid-September have also prioritized the freeing of thousands of detained members in prison and IDP camps across Iraq and Syria. The release and reintegration of these veteran operatives would greatly augment the group's operations, mirroring the dynamic we saw play out in 2013. Finally, ISIS leaders will likely move to exploit the recent instability and the attrition and cooption of CT forces in northeastern Syria to reinvigorate their insurgent and external operations efforts.

Outside of Iraq and Syria, ISIS's global network remains robust and—in some areas—is expanding, thanks to its approximately 20 global branches and networks. This year, the group publically announced new branches in Mozambique, Pakistan, and Turkey, underscoring leaders' determination to sustain their global reach amidst setbacks in Iraq and Syria. The capabilities of these branches and networks vary, but ISIS groups in

Afghanistan, the Philippines, the Sinai Peninsula, and West Africa have the capacity to conduct sophisticated attacks against local security forces and target US interests and personnel. Even networks lacking direct connection to ISIS core can be deadly—the attacks in April in Sri Lanka that killed over 290 people—including four Americans—serves as a salient reminder of ISIS’s reach and threat to US citizens. Additionally, the far-flung ISIS enterprise retains a degree of cohesion: ISIS this year launched several synchronized attack and propaganda campaigns in which numerous branches and networks participated, which is an indicator of enhanced connectivity.

Meanwhile, al-Qa’ida and its affiliates continue to target US interests, expand their regional insurgencies, and strengthen their connectivity. Senior leaders, including several based in Iran, oversee these global efforts, sustaining the network’s cohesion. In September, group leader Ayman al-Zawahiri praised the 9-11 attacks, reiterated his call for attacks against US and Israeli targets, and urged extremists to travel to radical Islamist terrorist battlefields, highlighting al-Qa’ida’s multi-pronged strategy. In addition, the group leaders’ announcement in January of a “Jerusalem Will Never Be Jewish” campaign in response to the move of the US embassy to Jerusalem underscores their efforts to tie the group’s regional efforts to al-Qa’ida’s overall global agenda. campaigns. Two attacks in Kenya and Mali, conducted by al-Shabaab and the al-Qa’ida-aligned, West Africa-based Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), have since been included under this campaign.

Al-Qa’ida’s regional insurgencies continue to achieve varying levels of success. In Somalia, al-Shabaab has ramped up its campaign against African Union forces, the local government, and US and Western personnel. In September, the group launched a large-scale assault on a base in Baledogle that houses US military personnel. In Mali and other parts of West Africa, JNIM and allied fighters have ramped up their attacks against international peacekeepers and local security forces, exacerbating instability and humanitarian conditions. In North Africa, local CT operations in Libya and Tunisia have probably stunted the growth of al-Qa’ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), but the group continues to pose a threat to government and Western targets throughout the region.

In Yemen, AQAP has sustained its insurgent campaign and may expand their efforts as continuing political instability threatens to diminish CT pressure against the group. In Syria, Hurras al-Din—an al-Qa’ida aligned group consisting of veteran extremists—is working to advance the group’s global agenda, although the deaths of at least one senior operative and the tenuous status of its safehaven in northwest Syria could impede their efforts. In Afghanistan, the death in September of the leader of al-Qa’ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) may disrupt their regional operations. Finally, al-Qa’ida

retains its long-standing ties to the Haqqani Network and other militant networks active in Afghanistan and Pakistan that frequently target US personnel.

In Iran, the regime continues to use terrorism to threaten the United States, our allies, and other opponents, as well as to cement its long-term political influence throughout the Middle East. As we have observed in recent months from Tehran's attacks on international shipping and Saudi oil facilities, the regime is intent on escalating its efforts to intimidate and impose costs on its opponents, posing a growing direct and indirect threat to US interests and personnel. Iran, through the IRGC-QF and other malign elements like the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) maintains links to terrorist operatives and networks in Europe, Asia, and Africa that could be called upon to target US or allied personnel.

Iran can also call upon a wide-range of proxy groups to support its terrorist and regional influence operations. Tehran is poised to use these entities to target US personnel in the event that the regime is threatened. Iranian leaders also nurture these alliances in pursuit of long-term political advantage, similar to its decades-long partnership with Hezbollah, which wields significant political influence within Lebanon and possesses a formidable military force including thousands of rockets. In Iraq, Iran has provided weapons and funding to a wide-variety of powerful militia groups, whose influence and advanced terrorist capabilities threaten the US presence there. Iran is also supporting Huthi forces in Yemen, whose increasingly bold attacks against Saudi Arabia could indirectly endanger US personnel. Finally, Iran maintains ties to several Palestinian military groups including Palestine Islamic Jihad, which has killed numerous civilians in Israel.

Global Trends Increasingly Impacting the CT Fight

Our ability to combat the diverse range of terrorist threats continues to be influenced, at times negatively, by broader military and political trends. Navigating these challenges will likely require leveraging a broad range of government resources and capabilities across the interagency, given their scope and scale.

- **Emerging technologies.** Terrorists continue to exploit rapid technological advances in fields like encrypted communications, social media, and unmanned aircraft systems (UAS). The speed at which industry responds to consumer demands for newer, more capable technologies also fuels terrorist innovation and, at times, limits our ability to disrupt their operations. Specifically, terrorists are continuing to explore the use of increasingly ubiquitous, more secure modes of communications in order to evade detection. While the amount of terrorist

content on mainstream platforms like Facebook has been curtailed, terrorists have responded by using less-accessible platforms to communicate and disseminate propaganda. Finally, commercially available unmanned systems—like aircraft (UAS) and surface vehicles (USV)—are enabling some groups to conduct tactical surveillance, smuggling operations, and attacks against key critical infrastructure targets like oil refineries or airports that can result in significant economic damage.

- **Conflict and Instability.** Enduring conflicts in several countries including Egypt, Mali, Nigeria, Libya, Syria, and Yemen continue to serve as incubators for terrorist presence. The intractable nature of these conflicts, their spillover into neighboring countries, and the long-term impacts on humanitarian conditions continue to provide terrorist groups with new opportunities to carve out safehavens, bolster operations, derive resources, and recruit the next generation of fighters. As an example, several ongoing conflicts and insurgencies across Africa have enabled terrorists aligned with al-Qa’ida and ISIS to expand their influence and embed with local militant groups, fueling an unprecedented rate of jihadist growth across the continent.
- **Partner Complacency and Distraction.** Some partners’ perception that the terrorist threat has been sufficiently reduced or eclipsed by other political or security concerns may increasingly prompt them to allocate resources away from CT efforts, potentially diminishing pressure on some networks.
- **Influence by Strategic Competitors.** The growing influence and footprint of US competitors—particularly China and Russia—in key CT theaters could constrain our ability to mobilize and direct local CT operations. Both Beijing and Moscow have increased their security, military, and CT assistance programs as part of their campaign to undermine and supplant US influence in parts of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East – regions that also host preeminent terrorist groups. In addition, our competitors often promote punitive and anti-democratic CT strategies that could fuel further radicalization to violence.

The Way Forward

These challenges require a nimble, aggressive US response that makes greater use of foreign partners and resources resident in both the interagency and private industry. An over-reliance on “business as usual” practices or kinetic efforts will increase the risks of

being outpaced by our terrorist adversaries and marginalized by our competitors, particularly as competing demands on US national security resources mount.

- **Bolstering Foreign Allies.** As the scale of the global terrorism challenge grows, foreign partners will play an increasingly central role in fighting it. Sustained US leadership, advisory, and capacity building efforts in both the military and non-military areas remain instrumental in ensuring that partners implement effective, comprehensive, and balanced CT measures, sufficiently resource them, and cooperate with neighbors and other allies. As noted in the 2018 National Strategy for Counterterrorism, proactively identifying and focusing on those allies that are best positioned and able to advance US CT efforts will prove key in countering the terrorist threat; this includes working with allies and partners on preventing and countering terrorist radicalization and recruitment in the first place – through not only strategic communications but community engagement and other “countering violent extremism” approaches.
- **Mobilizing Tech Sector Partners.** As noted previously, terrorist actors continue to move aggressively to exploit new technologies to communicate, appeal to new audiences, and recruit adherents. Establishing and supporting relationships with those companies that are driving these technological changes remains critically important in countering such efforts. These partnerships have already borne fruit: for instance, private sector action—enabled by government assistance—has greatly curtailed the accessibility of violent extremist content from ISIS on the internet. However, subsequent terrorist adaptations, including the increased use of closed social media forums, only highlight the need to sustain and build on these partnerships. US government engagement with entities like the industry-led Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) could help combat a broader spectrum of violent extremist content by using lessons learned in countering ISIS’s online presence, while also helping these companies navigate free speech issues. This should be complemented by support for local alternative narratives and counter-messaging in key countries around the world.
- **Exploiting Data.** I have previously testified about the growing data challenge the CT community faces. We continue to see an ever-expanding corpus of pertinent data, an explosion in social media information, and competing equities and authorities, non-standardized data, and challenges with incorporating biometrically-based screening systems. To overcome these challenges, we must increase our focus on expanding information sharing and improving our use of

data-driven techniques to counter terrorists' attempts to evade CT pressure. Given the wide range of US stakeholders with interests in data, broad reforms of our disclosure and information-sharing processes will require a whole-of-government approach that works to broadly reorient mindsets and cultures. In addition, we will continue to move towards standardizing our existing systems and developing common guidelines for use in order to facilitate greater access for relevant authorities.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for the opportunity to present NCTC's views and assessments this morning. I look forward to the Committee's questions.