THE 2018 U.S. NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR COUNTERTERRORISM: A SYNOPTIC OVERVIEW

Dan E. Stigall,* Chris Miller,** and Lauren Donatucci***

Any opinions expressed in this article are solely that of the authors and are not necessarily that of any agency of the United States government.

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* Dan E. Stigall is Counselor for International Affairs for the National Security Division of the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ). From 2017–2019, he served as a Director for Counterterrorism with the National Security Council, where he served as lead author and interagency coordinator for the U.S. National Strategy for Counterterrorism. He previously served with DOJ’s Office of International Affairs, where he focused on international cooperation with countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. He has served on active duty as a U.S. Army Judge Advocate (JAG) from 2001–2009, with assignments in Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. He has also served as an adjunct professor of International Law at The Judge Advocate General’s Legal Center and School (U.S. Army) and is currently a Professorial Lecturer in Law at The George Washington University Law School. In addition, he is a contributing fellow for the Louisiana State University Center for Civil Law Studies. B.A., J.D., Louisiana State University; LL.M., The George Washington University School of Law.

** Chris Miller is the Special Assistant to the President for Counterterrorism. He has been at the NSC since March, 2018. Mr. Miller is a retired Army Special Forces officer with extensive counterterrorism experience from the tactical to the geo-strategic level. He is a 1987 graduate of the George Washington University and received his Master’s in Security Studies from the Naval War College in 2001.

*** Lauren Donatucci currently serves as a Director for Counterterrorism in the National Security Council Directorate of Counterterrorism, where she is responsible for policy issues related to Europe, counterterrorism strategy, and terrorism prevention. Lauren joined the NSC from the National Counterterrorism Center where she served as a counterterrorism analyst for the last seven years. Lauren has also served as a Presidential Daily Briefer for NSC customers. Lauren holds a B.A. in International Studies with a focus on political science from Boston College.
INTRODUCTION

On October 4, 2018, President Trump approved the U.S. National Strategy for Counterterrorism (2018 NSCT). The United States has had several such strategies in the past, including the Bush-era National Strategy for Combating Terrorism (2003) and the Obama-era National Strategy for Counterterrorism (2011). There have also been a number of ancillary or supporting plans, such as the 2014 Strategy to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, and the 2016 Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States, etc. The 2018 NSCT, however, represents the first fully developed, national-level U.S. counterterrorism strategy since 2011. This is meaningful for several reasons, the most obvious being that it is the strategy guiding U.S. counterterrorism efforts under the current administration. In addition, it serves as a sort of

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2 CENT. INTELLIGENCE AGENCY, NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR COMBATTING TERRORISM (2003).

3 WHITE HOUSE, NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR COUNTERTERRORISM (2011) [hereinafter 2011 Strategy].


5 EXEC. OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, STRATEGIC IMPLEMENTATION PLAN FOR EMPOWERING LOCAL PARTNERS TO PREVENT VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE UNITED STATES 1 (2016).

6 President Donald J. Trump Is Protecting the United States from Terrorism, supra note 1.
marker by which to gauge stakeholder responses to shifting and evolving national security threats. The approaching anniversary of its release, therefore, provides an opportunity to evaluate the new strategic approach and efficacy of the 2018 NSCT. This article will briefly review a few aspects of the 2018 NSCT that are worthy of examination as its anniversary draws near. These include its wider scope, which encompasses domestic terrorism and state-sponsored terrorism; its focus on prevention efforts with a consideration of future threats; and the efficacy of its approach to pursuing and dismantling terrorist groups, most notably the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

I. COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGY

At the outset, it is worth considering what we mean by the term “counterterrorism strategy.” In his seminal treatise on the topic, Lawrence Freedman notes “[t]here is no agreed-upon definition of strategy that describes the field and limits its boundaries.”7 Modern strategists understand the concept as evaluating ends, ways, and means to achieve objectives and bring about a desired end state.8 Joseph Nye, Jr. posits “[a] strategy relates

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7 LAWRENCE FREEDMAN, STRATEGY: A HISTORY xi (2d ed. 2015); see also Williamson Murray and Mark Grimsley, Introduction: On Strategy, in THE MAKING OF STRATEGY: RULERS, STATES, AND WAR 1 (Williamson Murray et. al eds. 1994) (“The concept of ‘strategy’ has proven notoriously difficult to define. Many theorists have attempted it, only to see their efforts wither beneath the blasts of critics.”).
8 Id.
means to ends, and that requires clarity about goals (preferred outcomes), resources, and tactics for their use." U.S. Department of Defense doctrine, in turn, defines strategy as “[a] prudent idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, and/or multinational objectives.” Strategies, simply stated, are directional documents that serve as guides to decision-making—something that is critically important in complex endeavors (such as counterterrorism) that depend on the synchronized efforts of a bewildering array of diverse, competing bureaucratic entities.

As with the term “strategy,” there is no universally accepted definition of terrorism. There are, however, a number of similar definitions in the domestic law of nations and a range of behavior that is generally understood to constitute terrorist activity. Pursuant to such definitions, terrorism can be bifurcated into international and domestic terrorism. On that score, section 2331 of Title 18 of the United States Code defines “international terrorism” as activities that: (1) involve violent acts or acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any State or that would be a criminal violation if committed within the jurisdiction of the United States and appear to be intended to

10 Dep’t of Def., Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms 196 (July 2019).
intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (2) are designed to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion or to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination or kidnapping; and (3) occur primarily outside the territorial jurisdiction of the United States or transcend national boundaries through the means by which they are accomplished, the persons they appear intended to intimidate or coerce, or the locale in which their perpetrators operate or seek asylum.\textsuperscript{12}

United States law defines domestic terrorism, in turn, as activities that (1) involve acts dangerous to human life, which are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any State; (2) appear to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping; and (3) occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} See 18 U.S.C. § 2331(1) (2012). Note that the United States has experienced international terrorism in many forms, such as the Croatian group called Otpor, which hijacked a commercial airplane traveling from New York to Paris in 1976 in an attempt to garner attention for its separatist agenda and its political objective of obtaining independence from Yugoslavia; the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, which killed 270 people—including 189 American citizens; the hijacking of the cruise ship called the \textit{Achille Lauro} in 1985; the bombing of a West Berlin discotheque frequented by U.S. soldiers in 1986; the 1983 bombing of a U.S. barracks in Beirut by Islamic extremists—causing 241 deaths; the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center which killed 6 people, wounded 1042, and caused widespread damage; and the attacks of September 11, 2001. See \textsc{Dan E. Stigall, Counterrorism and the Comparative Law of Investigative Detention} 23 (2009).

\textsuperscript{13} See 18 U.S.C. § 2331(5). Note that the United States has a long history with domestic terrorism, such as terrorist acts conducted by anarchists associated
Beyond those statutory definitions, Department of Defense doctrine broadly defines terrorism, both international and domestic, as “[t]he unlawful use of violence or threat of violence, often motivated by religious, political, or other ideological beliefs, to instill fear and coerce governments or societies in pursuit of goals that are usually political.”\textsuperscript{14} Counterterrorism, in turn, is defined by the Department of Defense as “[a]ctivities and operations taken to neutralize terrorists and their organizations and networks in order to render them incapable of using violence to instill fear and coerce governments or societies to achieve their goals.”\textsuperscript{15}

A national counterterrorism strategy, therefore, can be generally understood as a coherent plan to use the instruments of national power to neutralize terrorists, their organizations, and their networks in order to render them incapable of using violence to instill fear and to coerce a specific government or society to react in

\textsuperscript{14} Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, supra note 10, at 217.

\textsuperscript{15} Id. at 55.
accordance with their goals. It is with this context in mind that we review the 2018 NSCT.

II. THE 2018 UNITED STATES NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR COUNTERTERRORISM

The 2018 NSCT was developed through a lengthy interagency process that brought together representatives of the U.S. counterterrorism community to discuss the desired strategic approach to countering terrorism and to illuminate best practices based on the experience of national security professionals from an array of backgrounds. The rigor of that process produced a strategic document that is both comprehensive and forward-looking, but which does not abandon those previous counterterrorism approaches that were collectively assessed to be effective. As former Special Assistant to the President for Counterterrorism, Christopher P. Costa, has noted, the 2018 NSCT was an evolution rather than a revolution in counterterrorism strategy—a strategic document built on best practices that captured the professional consensus of the U.S. counterterrorism community but which also provided a

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more agile, expansive, and updated strategic counterterrorism approach.\footnote{Id.; see also Cameron Burks, 
\textit{A Counterterrorism Strategy That Could Work for America}, THE HILL (Nov. 7, 2018), https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/homeland-security/415624-a-counterterrorism-strategy-that-could-work-for-america ("The career government employees detailed to the NSC staff, and their U.S. intelligence community and military colleagues throughout the interagency, played a key and direct role in developing and writing this Strategy. I commend the executive office for setting the vision and enabling the working professionals to shape the strategic elements that will protect our nation. This is the right way—clear from politics—to demonstrate to the American people that effective counterterrorism will only work by utilizing all elements of national power . . . "); see also Christopher P. Costa & Joshua A. Geltzer, \textit{DHS’s New Counterterrorism Strategy Reflects Professionalism, Not Politics}, DEFENSE ONE (Sept. 20, 2019) ("Almost one year ago, the Trump administration released a lucid National Strategy for Counterterrorism—the first document of its kind since 2011—which serves as a comprehensive blueprint for confronting a range of terrorist threats, now and into the future. Both of us had left the White House by then, yet we cheered a strategy that reflected genuine counterterrorism expertise rather than politics.")}, https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2019/09/dhs-new-counterterrorism-strategy-reflects-professionalism-not-politics/160030/。

The 2018 NSCT differs from its predecessor documents in a variety of ways, including through its recognition that the counterterrorism landscape has changed considerably in the past several years. The strategy has been updated to address subjects that were not previously strategic priorities but are now salient issues of counterterrorism concern. These include issues such as the use of biometric data and captured enemy material ("battlefield evidence").\footnote{EXEC. OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR COUNTERTERRORISM OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA 18 (2018) [hereinafter NSCT].} But beyond its updated content, the 2018 NSCT marks a different strategic approach. For instance, the strategy eschews a group-specific approach and focuses instead on “threat agnostic”
actions that can be used to counter all terrorists with the intent and
ability to harm the United States.\textsuperscript{19} It emphasizes the use of all of
America’s tools to prevent and counter terrorism, both military and
non-military. It also emphasizes the importance of border security,
“strengthening security at points of entry, protecting critical
infrastructure, and facilitating preparedness.”\textsuperscript{20} Perhaps the most
marked difference between the 2018 NSCT and its predecessor
documents, however, is its wider scope—placing strategic emphasis
on all forms of terrorism, including domestic terrorism and state-
sponsored terrorism.\textsuperscript{21}

To accomplish its desired outcomes, the 2018 NSCT pursues
the following six strategic objectives by ensuring:

1. The capacity of terrorists to conduct attacks in the
   homeland and against vital United States interests
   overseas is sharply diminished;

2. The sources of strength and support upon which
   terrorists rely are severed;

\textsuperscript{19} President Donald J. Trump is Protecting the United States from Terrorism,
supra note 1; see also John W. Rollins, The Trump Administration’s National
Strategy for Counterterrorism: Overview and Comparison to the Prior
Administration, CRS INSIGHT (Jan. 29, 2019), https://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/
IN11027.pdf (highlighting the differences between strategic approaches of the
2011 and the 2018 NSCT). Such a flexible approach is required given the
evolving nature of the terrorist threat and because of the unpredictability of
strategic shocks unfolding “in a rapidly globalizing world.” See JULIAN
RICHARDS, A GUIDE TO NATIONAL SECURITY: THREATS, RESPONSES, AND
STRATEGIES 24 (2012).
\textsuperscript{20} President Donald J. Trump Is Protecting the United States from Terrorism,
supra note 1; see also Rollins, supra note 19.
\textsuperscript{21} Rollins, supra note 19 (underscoring that the 2018 NSCT applies to
“[n]umerous radical Islamists, revolutionaries, nationalists, separatists, and
domestic groups,” while the 2011 Strategy only applied to “Al Qaeda and its
affiliates and adherents”).
3. Terrorists’ ability to radicalize, recruit, and mobilize to violence in the homeland is diminished;
4. Americans are prepared and protected from terrorist attacks in the homeland, including through more exacting border security and law enforcement actions;
5. Terrorists are unable to acquire or use WMDs, including chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons, and other advanced weaponry; and
6. Public sector partners, private sector partners, and foreign partners to take a greater role in preventing and countering terrorism.\(^\text{22}\)

To meet these six strategic objectives, the 2018 NSCT pursues the following lines of effort:

1. Pursue terrorist threats to their source;
2. Isolate terrorists from financial, material, and logistical sources of support;
3. Modernize and integrate a broader set of United States tools and authorities to counter terrorism and protect the homeland;
4. Protect United States infrastructure and enhance preparedness;
5. Counter terrorist radicalization and recruitment; [and]
6. Strengthen the counterterrorism abilities of international partners.\(^\text{23}\)

\(\text{A. An Effective Counterterrorism Approach}\)

As Costa noted, the “contours of new counterterrorism policies were operationalized and tested” early on in the current administration.\(^\text{24}\) Those policies—which are crystallized in the 2018 NSCT—include pursuing terrorists to their source; isolating terrorists from their sources of strength and support; and working

\(^{22}\) NSCT, supra note 18, at 5 (emphasis omitted).

\(^{23}\) Id.

\(^{24}\) Costa, supra note 16.
with a wide range of partners to achieve desired results. The strategy’s provisions outlining this approach make it clear that the United States must do more than attrite leadership and/or “disrupt individual plots—we must pursue the entirety of the network involved in terror plots to prevent the remaining terrorists from reviving their operations.”25 One can examine the success of this approach in the U.S. counter-ISIS effort, which has achieved notable success in Syria. United States and coalition partners have “liberated more than 20,000 square miles of territory previously held by ISIS in Syria,” and freed an estimated five million people from ISIS control.26

These battlefield successes and a range of other national security efforts have brought the United States and its coalition partners to the cusp of a potential transition in the campaign against radical Islamist terrorism (including groups such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and their affiliates) to a future security model in which such groups can be contained and largely managed by local and/or regional security forces. However, despite these achievements, additional

25 NSCT, supra note 18, at 13; see also Rollins, supra note 19; see also Costa & Geltzer, supra note 17 (heralding the new DHS Strategy for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence as an outgrowth of the 2018 NSCT and as a demonstration that a “vital part of the federal government’s counterterrorism apparatus is taking seriously the implementation of the administration’s national strategy”).

work, sacrifice and vigilance are still required to sufficiently degrade such terrorist groups and their networks so they no longer pose a major threat to the United States. This requires a broader range of capabilities beyond military or “kinetic” options.

On that score, critics of U.S. policy have long complained that “[a]t the vortex of the U.S. counterterrorism strategy is the preponderant reliance on the use of military means as the *deus ex machina* for 'defeating terrorism.'” For this reason, the 2018 NSCT notes that military tools are not the only counterterrorism tools that must be used to effectively counter the terrorist threat, emphasizes the need for “non-kinetic” activity, and expressly highlights the range of non-military tools that are to be utilized, “such as law enforcement, intelligence, diplomacy, financial measures, stabilization, development, prevention, and intervention and reintegration programs.”

As the terrorist threat has evolved, this multidisciplinary approach has become increasingly important. The role of the Internet in enabling the rapid spread of terrorist ideology, for example, requires a new approach from the military-focused counterterrorism efforts of the early post-9/11 era. Coordinated

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27 ROUTLEDGE, TAYLOR & FRANCIS GRP., WEST AFRICA AND THE U.S. WAR ON TERROR 6 (George Klay Kieh & Kelechi Kalu eds., 2013). Such a “strongly military conception of security” is consistent with the national security approach that evolved during the Cold War “whereby a balance of hard power was the underpinning of national security.” See RICHARDS, supra note 19 at 8.

28 NSCT, supra note 18, at 11.
whole-of-government efforts will allow the U.S. government to address the diverse threats from state-sponsored actors, hierarchical terrorist groups, and lone actors. While the United States has, of course, made use of such an approach in the past, the 2018 NSCT—which sought to retain best practices—elevates the shift to non-kinetic solutions as a matter of strategic emphasis.  

B. Domestic Terrorism

As mentioned, the 2018 NSCT addresses all forms of terrorism, including domestic terrorism. The strategy notes that

29 For an excellent discussion of recent non-kinetic U.S. counterterrorism efforts, see The FY20 Budget: State Department Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism Bureau: Hearing Before the Subcomm. on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism of the H. Comm. on Foreign Affairs, 116th Cong. (2019) (statement of Ambassador Nathan Sales) [hereinafter Ambassador Sales]; see also Combatting the Terrorist Threat Through Agility, Persistence, and Resilience: Hearing before the S. Comm. on Homeland Sec. and Governmental Affairs, 116th Cong. (2018) (statement of Russell Travers, Acting Director, National Counterterrorism Center) (“To achieve durable results, to reduce terrorism incidents, the new National Strategy for Counterterrorism recognizes that we must prioritize a broader range of non-military capabilities to build societal resilience to terrorism and blunt the ability of terrorist groups to radicalize and recruit individuals. As the new strategy highlights, this will require a wide range of partnerships, including working with like-minded countries, to fund micro initiatives at the community level to redirect those who join terrorist groups for economic reasons or to promote reconciliation among disputing factions. In doing so, we must be far more entrepreneurial in funding pilot programs to test what works. We also need to demonstrate more patience as we seek to resolve underlying conditions that are often slow to change.”).


31 NSCT, supra note 18, at 11 (“In the homeland, we will continue to confront the rising threat of attacks committed by persons inspired and mobilized to violence by both radical Islamist ideologies and domestic terrorist ideologies.”).
the United States faces terrorist threats within its borders from individuals mobilized to violence by a range of ideologies and who threaten the safety of people within the United States.\textsuperscript{32} The strategy outlines the nature of this threat in detail:

\begin{quote}
[T]he United States has long faced a persistent security threat from domestic terrorists who are not motivated by a radical Islamist ideology but are instead motivated by other forms of violent extremism, such as racially motivated extremism, animal rights extremism, environmental extremism, sovereign citizen extremism, and militia extremism. Such extremist groups attempt to advance their agendas through acts of force or violence. Notably, domestic terrorism in the United States is on the rise, with an increasing number of fatalities and violent nonlethal acts committed by domestic terrorists against people and property in the United States. The economic harm caused by domestic terrorists has also increased sharply as domestic terrorists have continued to destroy property, disrupt business, and perpetrate financial crimes that are designed to damage certain sectors of the United States economy.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{32} See id. (“The National Strategy for Counterterrorism recognizes the full range of terrorist threats that the United States confronts within and beyond our borders, and emphasizes the use of all elements of national power to combat terrorism and terrorist ideologies.”).

\textsuperscript{33} Id. at 10. The illustrative list of categories articulated in the 2018 NSCT echoes the categories for domestic terrorism used by the FBI. See Confronting the Rise of Domestic Terrorism in the Homeland: Hearing Before the H. Comm. on Homeland Sec., 116th Cong. (2019) [hereinafter Hearing Before the H. Comm. on Homeland Sec.] (statement of Michael McGarrity, Assistant Director, Counterterrorism Division, Federal Bureau of Investigation) (“The FBI classifies domestic terrorism threats into four main categories: racially motivated violent extremism, anti-government/anti-authority extremism, animal rights/environmental extremism, and abortion extremism. The drivers of these domestic violent extremists include perceptions of government or law enforcement overreach, socio-political conditions, and reactions to legislative actions, and they remain constant. Although domestic terrorism activity may fall outside of these four categories, the vast majority of our investigations can be characterized as one of the above.”).
The inclusion of domestic terrorism is notable because it is the first time that the U.S. government has incorporated domestic terrorism into a U.S. national counterterrorism strategy as a focus and strategic priority, thereby bringing new emphasis to this important national security threat. The 2018 NSCT contains numerous specific references to domestic terrorism, such as its priority actions calling for improvement in “the ability to share timely and sensitive information on threats and the individuals perpetrating them, whether motivated by domestic or foreign terrorist ideologies,” and the call to “investigate ties between domestic terrorists not motivated by radical Islamist ideologies and their overseas counterparts to more fully understand them.” Notably, however, the structure of the 2018 NSCT makes almost every strategic line of effort and priority action applicable to domestic terrorism. This is because the 2018 NSCT is not a group-

34 The 2011 Strategy made only a glancing, oblique reference to domestic terrorism and emphasized that it “focus[ed] predominantly on … al-Qa’ida linked and inspired threats.” 2011 Strategy, supra note 3, at 12. Because the 2011 strategy largely focused on Al-Qaeda, it lacked meaningful strategic guidance vis-à-vis domestic terrorist groups or other international terrorist groups. See id. In contrast, the 2018 NSCT references domestic terrorism repeatedly, includes domestic terrorist groups among the terrorist groups that the strategy seeks to counter, and adopts an approach whereby almost every strategic line of effort and priority action is equally applicable across a wide range of both international and domestic terrorist groups. See NSCT, supra note 18, at 5, 10-11, 14, 18, 21; see also Rollins, supra note 19.

35 NSCT, supra note 18, at 14; see W.J. Hennigan, How Big a Role Does Social Media Play in Homegrown Terrorism?, TIME (Oct. 30, 2018), https://time.com/5438481/terrorism-social-media/.

36 NSCT, supra note 18, at 18.

37 Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, supra note 10, at 133 (defining line of effort as, “[i]n the context of planning, using the purpose (cause and
specific strategy but is, rather, designed so that its provisions have applicability against “all terrorists with the ability and the intent to harm the United States.”\(^{38}\) This specifically includes domestic terrorism.\(^{39}\)

The new strategic emphasis on domestic terrorism has had a tangible impact. For instance, in August, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Acting Secretary Kevin McAleenan noted that “[t]he national counterterrorism strategy . . . prioritizes domestic terrorism in multiple places and calls out racially motivated violent extremism. We’ve taken that direction and moved forward on it.”\(^{40}\) Similarly, in May 2019, Brian Murphy, the DHS principal deputy undersecretary for Intelligence and Analysis, testified before the U.S. House Homeland Security Committee that DHS is focusing more on reporting on domestic terrorism to better support the NSCT.\(^{41}\) In his testimony, Undersecretary Murphy noted, “[s]pecifically, we have significantly increased our open source collection against domestic violent extremist groups. We have also

\(^{38}\) Id. at I; see Rollins, supra note 19.

\(^{39}\) NSCT, supra note 18, at 10; see Ambassador Sales, supra note 29.


been working with our partners in the FBI to provide context on the domestic terrorism threat with particular attention to tactics and techniques domestic violent extremists utilize to conduct their attacks.”

Likewise, on April 19, DHS announced the creation of a new Office for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention, which will coordinate resources and capabilities to better serve the needs of states and local communities dealing with terrorism—including domestic terrorism. According to a statement released upon its creation, “[t]his new office supports the direction the President outlined in the National Strategy for Counterterrorism,” and will widen “the scope of previous Departmental efforts to ensure that all forms of violence, regardless of the ideological motivation, are being addressed.”

Interestingly, the Department of State is also working to help address the domestic terrorism threat by increasing its focus on racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism overseas, studying how these violent extremists operate as international networks, how ideology fuels cumulative radicalization, and how racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists may be learning

42 Id.
tactics from other international terrorist groups. Understanding these connections will allow the United States to better protect against the domestic terrorist threat as it evolves through these global interactions.

In support of United States strategic objectives, the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) continue to combat domestic terrorism through successful investigations and prosecutions. Recent examples include the 2018 arrest of Cesar Sayoc for mailing improvised explosive devices to numerous victims throughout the United States, including Democratic politicians and a media outlet; the prosecution of Dylann Roof for killing nine African-American parishioners at Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina; and the prosecution of James Fields Jr. for killing one woman and injuring dozens when he intentionally drove a car into a crowd of counter-protestors at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Domestic terrorism continues to pose a significant threat to the United States and recent tragic events, such as the attack in El Paso, Texas, underscore that while progress is being made in U.S.

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44 See Ambassador Sales, supra note 29.
45 Hearing Before the H. Comm. on Homeland Sec., supra note 33 (statement of Brad Wiegmann, Deputy Assistant Att’y Gen., Department of Justice).
46 Id.
47 Id.
domestic counterterrorism efforts, there is still work to be done before the objectives of the strategy can be achieved. The matter, nonetheless, is elevated to a strategic priority in the 2018 NSCT, which provides strategic guidance to U.S. departments and agencies addressing this complex threat.

C. Iran and Iran-supported Terrorist Groups

The 2018 NSCT places far more emphasis on countering Iran and Iran-supported terrorism than its predecessor documents, noting that the United States continues “to face threats from Iran, the most prominent state sponsor of terrorism, through its global network of operatives and its ongoing support to an array of terrorist groups.”48 The strategy highlights the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) in providing financial and material support, training, and guidance to Lebanese Hizballah (Hizballah) and other Shia militant groups operating in Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen—and notes that such groups “use terrorism and other asymmetric means in partnership with Iran to expand their influence in Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Syria, and Yemen and to destabilize their rivals.”49

48 NSCT, supra note 18, at 1. Note that the 2011 Strategy mentioned Iran only once and relegated discussion of Iran-backed groups to a single, final paragraph. See 2011 Strategy, supra note 3, at 18; see also Rollins, supra note 19.
49 NSCT, supra note 18, at 9.
The 2018 NSCT states, “[t]he United States will continue to acquire evidence of these states’ deceptive practices and work with allies and partners to identify and punish states that support terrorism.” United States efforts to counter this threat span the full breadth of available tools, including public and diplomatic engagement, financial tools, and law enforcement and prosecutorial tools. Some United States efforts have focused on disruption of Iran-sponsored terrorism, while others have focused on terrorism prevention. For instance, the DOJ and FBI have continued to investigate and prosecute persons who violate Iran-related sanctions or who otherwise attempt to assist Iran through illegal means.

Similarly, in 2018 the DOJ created the "Hezbollah Financing and

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50 Id. at 16.
Narcoterrorism Team," to develop "an aggressive and coordinated law enforcement response" to Hizballah's criminal activity.\textsuperscript{52}

These efforts are coupled with the work of the Department of State, which announced in April 2019 that it will be offering a $10 million dollar reward for “information leading to the disruption of the financial mechanisms of the global terrorist organization Lebanese Hizballah.”\textsuperscript{53} In addition, through sustained diplomatic engagement, the Department of State supported Argentina’s historic designation in July of Hizballah as a terrorist organization, the first country in South America to do so.\textsuperscript{54} The Department of State will also continue to host and support multilateral efforts, such as their support of a regional security mechanism with Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay focused on disrupting Hizballah’s financial and organized crime activities in the tri-border region.\textsuperscript{55}

The Department of Treasury has also been a critical part of this effort. For instance, the Department of Treasury’s Office of


\textsuperscript{55} See Ambassador Sales, supra note 29.
Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) provided information to the private sector on how Iran uses commercial airlines to support the activities of terrorist groups to raise awareness of potential vulnerabilities.\textsuperscript{56} And sanctions against the Iranian regime have played a critical role in disrupting Iran’s support to terrorist networks.\textsuperscript{57}

Cumulatively, these efforts should sever groups like Hizballah from the funding streams that allow them to develop attack capabilities across the world. They will be combined with an array of other strategic efforts to diminish the threat to the United States from Iranian sponsored terrorism by targeting their ability to fund operations, recruit, and access the technology and weapons that enable terrorist attacks. Together with other Iran-related strategies, United States efforts have had a positive impact. Hizballah has been

\textsuperscript{57} See Iran Sanctions, U.S. Dep’t of Treasury (last visited Oct. 5, 2019), https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Pages/iran.aspx ("November 4, 2018 marked the final day of the 180-day wind-down period following the President’s May 8, 2018 announcement to cease the United States’ participation in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). On November 5, 2018, the United States fully re-imposed the sanctions on Iran that had been lifted or waived under the JCPOA. These are the toughest U.S. sanctions ever imposed on Iran, and will target critical sectors of Iran’s economy, such as the energy, shipping and shipbuilding, and financial sectors. The United States is engaged in a campaign of maximum financial pressure on the Iranian regime and intends to enforce aggressively these sanctions that have come back into effect."); see also Six Charts that Show How Hard US Sanctions Have Hit Iran, BBC NEWS (May 2, 2019), https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48119109; KATHERINE BAUER ET AL., PN38, WASH. INST. FOR NEAR EAST POL’Y, REINFORCING THE ROLE OF SANCTIONS IN RESTRAINING IRAN, 1, 2-6 (2017), https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/reinforcing-the-role-of-sanctions-in-restraining-iran.
forced to undertake “unprecedented austerity measures because the money from Iran is not flowing in as it once did.”\(^{58}\) This financial weakness reflects advancement toward the 2018 NSCT’s priority action to “use our economic authorities, including financial sanctions and other financial measures, as well as law enforcement action, to deny terrorists the ability to raise funds, including by disrupting terrorist financing and dismantling terrorist support networks, to prevent terrorists from abusing the United States and global financial systems, and to dissuade people from providing funds or materiel to terrorists.”\(^{59}\)

**D. Terrorism Prevention**

The NSCT also places a greater strategic emphasis on prevention, underscoring the importance of terrorism prevention as a counterterrorism tool that will help “optimize and focus our resources to effectively prevent and counter those terrorists who pose a direct threat to the United States homeland and vital national interests.”\(^{60}\) The strategy seeks to “counter terrorists’ ability to recruit and radicalize online and through other means,” and dedicates an entire line of effort to terrorism prevention.\(^{61}\) It acknowledges that we have not dedicated as much attention to


\(^{59}\) NSCT, *supra* note 18, at 16.

\(^{60}\) *Id.* at 11.

\(^{61}\) *Id.*
prevention and are in need of an institutionalized prevention architecture. These prevention efforts will entail working closely with our state, local, foreign, civil society, and private sector partners.

To that end, in February, the White House joined His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan to bring together private sector, civil society, and foreign partners to discuss countering terrorist content on the Internet and terrorism prevention efforts.62 Similarly, DHS periodically hosts a Digital Forum on Terrorism Prevention to engage state and local authorities, think tanks, NGOs, and industry executives on innovative approaches to terrorism prevention and on ways these efforts can contribute to an overarching prevention architecture.63 The expansion of DHS prevention efforts into targeted violence through its newly formed Office of Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention is intended to allow the department to utilize new resources and to open the door to new partners who would not typically be involved in counterterrorism efforts.

The United States is also focusing more on international prevention efforts. The NSCT outlines the need for a “global prevention architecture” that will be created “with the help of civil society, private partners, and the technology industry.”64 Notably, the Department of State has requested a 60% increase in its budget for prevention efforts in FY20.65 State’s terrorism prevention programs include efforts that will “undercut terrorist recruiting” by demonstrating “that their claims are false and do not offer effective solutions.”66 As an example of this sort of activity, a Department of State program created an online graphic novel depicting realities of life under ISIS’ brutal rule and what happens to the families of fighters. According to Ambassador Nathan Sales, Coordinator for Counterterrorism within the U.S. Department of State, this effort led to a measurable decline in support for radical ideology among those that viewed the graphic novel and an even greater decline in support for specific terrorist groups among this audience.67

The strategic emphasis the 2018 NSCT places on prevention reflects the evolution of the U.S. counterterrorism approach in

64 NSCT, supra note 18, at 21.
65 See Ambassador Sales, supra note 29.
66 NSCT, supra note 18, at 21.
67 See Ambassador Sales, supra note 29; see also BUREAU OF EDUC. AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS, P2P: Challenging Extremism Together, DEP’T OF STATE (Feb. 18, 2016), https://eca.state.gov/p2p (describing the Department of State's P2P (Peer to Peer): Challenging Extremism initiative by which "the U.S. government is working with university students to reach those individuals most susceptible to extremist messaging, as well as more general audiences and those who have the ability to make a difference").
response to changes in the threat environment. According to the FBI, the threat has evolved from complex, externally directed terrorist attack plots to attacks that are increasingly perpetrated by lone actors inspired by domestic or international terrorist ideologies. These lone actors are particularly challenging for law enforcement to identify and disrupt prior to action, and the lack of operational leaders directing plots from conflict zones limits kinetic counterterrorism options.

Terrorism prevention will be a key tool to minimizing the threat before individuals fully radicalize or mobilize to violence. Prevention also aligns with the 2018 NSCT emphasis on partnerships as the most effective prevention programs succeed by empowering local partners. Relatedly, moving towards a counterterrorism approach that increasingly emphasizes prevention should allow the U.S. government to conserve resources by diminishing the need for more costly counterterrorism efforts.

**CONCLUSION**

A national counterterrorism strategy is a government’s plan to use the instruments of national power to neutralize terrorists, their organizations, and their networks in order to render them incapable

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of using violence to instill fear and to coerce the government or its citizens to react in accordance with the terrorists’ malign goals. Counterterrorism strategies are important because they occupy that critical space between counterterrorism policy and operations, allowing governments to make appropriate decisions about resources and actions.\textsuperscript{69} Such a document should guide decision-making at the national level and facilitate the synchronization of the efforts of government departments and agencies in order to achieve defined end states. The 2018 NSCT accomplishes this by aligning all available instruments of United States national power, utilizing best practices gleaned from decades of counterterrorism experience, and adapting to the contemporary counterterrorism landscape to protect the United States against terrorist threats. The result is a strategy that has been updated to address the terrorist threat currently faced by the United States, and that sets forth strategic guidance to counter all terrorists with the ability and the intent to harm the United States, its citizens, and its interests abroad (including both domestic and state-sponsored terrorism).\textsuperscript{70} This aspect of the strategy also makes it more agile by ensuring its utility against a

\textsuperscript{69} Richard K. Betts, \textit{Is Strategy an Illusion?} 25 Int’l Sec., no. 2, Fall 2000, at 7 (noting, "strategy is a distinct plan between policy and operations, an idea for connecting the two rather than either of the two themselves").

\textsuperscript{70} NSCT, \textit{supra} note 18, at 1; see Ambassador Sales, \textit{supra} note 29; see also Rollins, \textit{supra} note 19.
wide array terrorist groups and permitting strategic space for more tailored responses to individual groups.

The aspects of the 2018 NSCT touched upon in this article are only a few of its most important elements. Far more could be written on its emphasis on strategic communication; its strategic direction to counter violent terrorist ideologies;\textsuperscript{71} or its strong emphasis on border security, strengthening security at all ports of entry into the United States, protecting critical United States infrastructure, and facilitating preparedness.\textsuperscript{72} There is, likewise, still much to note regarding its updated approach to issues such as the use of biometric data\textsuperscript{73} and battlefield evidence.\textsuperscript{74}

As with all strategies, its overall efficacy will ultimately depend on the continuation of efforts undertaken to fulfil its vision and achieve its desired end states. After all, a strategy disjoined from action is a chimera—idle thoughts and illusory aims; mere

\textsuperscript{71} NSCT, \textit{supra} note 18, at 22.
\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Id.} at 1.
\textsuperscript{73} For more on the use of biometrics see Russell E. Travers, Deputy Dir., U.S. Nat’l Counterterrorism Ctr., Counterterrorism in a World of Competing Priorities, Remarks as Prepared for the World Counter Terror Cong., London, (Mar. 5, 2019), https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news_documents/20190305_Travers_World_CT_Congress_remarks_as_prepared.pdf (“As we saw in the attacks in Paris and Brussels, the use of high-quality, fake national ID cards and passports will challenge any names-based system. To ensure operational relevance, we will need to strive for near real-time vetting such that the officer doing the screening can enter available biographic and biometric information and determine if there is any available data to suggest that the individual is a known or suspected terrorist. We will need to enhance our focus on collection, sharing, and using biometrics. With upwards of two million screening opportunities per day, this near real-time biographic/biometric screening will be a daunting task, but it will be required to keep pace with the threat.”).
\textsuperscript{74} NSCT, \textit{supra} note 18, at 18.
words on paper. Its true realization requires the allocation of resources, effort, commitment, and effective leadership. The summary above, however, permits an understanding of the “agile, expansive, and updated strategic counterterrorism approach” adopted by the 2018 NSCT and how the document guides U.S. departments and agencies to better protect the United States from the threats posed by both international and domestic terrorism.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{75} See Costa, supra note 16.