

A View from the CT Foxhole: Christopher O'Leary, Former FBI Counterterrorism Senior Executive and Director of Hostage Recovery

By Brian Dodwell

Christopher O'Leary has over two decades of working on counterterrorism investigations and operations for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Before leaving federal service, O'Leary served as the U.S. Government's Director of Hostage Rescue and Recovery, leading an interagency task force dedicated to the mission of safely bringing home Americans taken hostage abroad by a terrorist organization. He began his career with the FBI in the Minneapolis Field Office serving as a Special Agent on the Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) and as an FBI SWAT Operator.

Over his career in counterterrorism, O'Leary served in numerous critical leadership roles including Supervisory Special Agent of the Al-Qaeda Squad of the New York JTTF, Unit Chief in command of the FBI's elite Counterterrorism Fly Team, Assistant Special Agent in Charge of the New York JTTF, and as a Senior Executive in the Counterterrorism Division at FBI Headquarters. O'Leary has extensive experience working on counterterrorism matters around the world with the U.S. Special Operations and Intelligence Community, as well as with Intelligence and Security Services from numerous international partners.

In addition to his time with the FBI, O'Leary also has more than 20 years of service as a United States Marine, where he attained the rank of Gunnery Sergeant.

CTC: In over two decades of service in the FBI, you had numerous significant roles in counterterrorism, from the tactical to the strategic. Was there a particular role that you found most impactful or formative in terms of your own understanding of how to combat terrorist threats? What were the most significant lessons you learned about CT in that role?

O'Leary: I would say that my time as the unit chief of the Counterterrorism Fly Team for the FBI was maybe my most meaningful and impactful to the CT fight. As you are aware, the unit formed in response to the findings of the 9/11 Commission and it's kind of a unique entity. It sits at the intersection of law enforcement investigations and operations, intelligence operations, and military operations. My time leading the men and women who compose that exceptional unit allowed me to impact investigations everywhere from the Boston bombing to the response to Benghazi to counter-ISIS operations in Syria and Iraq. So, the depth and breadth of what I was able to experience in my seven years in command of the Counterterrorism Fly Team allowed me to see terrorism at every level, from the tactical and operational level to strategy and policy making. I dealt with the White House on several occasions regarding how we were going to develop and implement policy. So, it was definitely an interesting time.

I would say the most significant lesson that I took away during

that time was to never forget the tragedy of 9/11. The terrorism threat is an enduring and ever-evolving threat. If we become complacent and we have another failure of imagination, we will get struck again. So, I was always paying attention and learning, being a lifelong student of terrorism and striving to understand the threat and ensuring that the people who I was charged with leading were also given the tools and the access to training and education so they could continue to develop their knowledge base and have the flexibility and adaptability to address any threat that popped up.

CTC: Can you talk a little bit about what makes the Fly Team different or how that experience was different than perhaps your more traditional assignments?

O'Leary: Counterterrorism Fly Team agents and intelligence analysts are no different than any other agents or analysts within the FBI. They just focus specifically on counterterrorism, and they're trained at a very high level to be able to conduct FBI investigations or operations anywhere in the world and in partnership with a variety of units or entities from across the Department of Defense, the U.S. Special Operations community, our intelligence community, and military or intelligence components from our close international partners. Counterterrorism Fly Team Special Agents all must pass a very challenging selection course and then go through an additional eight-month training pipeline. The goal is to create a kind of 'super agent' who's capable of doing anything and everything you would hope and imagine an FBI Counterterrorism Agent should be able to do. The FBI has highly specialized teams that are usually utilized for specific mission requirements, however these teams are often not suitable for deployment to high-threat environments on a moment's notice. That is where the Fly Team comes in, with the ability to deploy highly trained Counterterrorism Agents with a variety of highly specialized skill sets to any corner of the globe. This capability gives the FBI investigative reach to conduct investigations and operations from Afghanistan, to Libya, to East Africa, to Syria and Iraq, or anywhere there may be a need. While deployed, the Counterterrorism Fly Team Agents are often partnering with a unit from U.S. Special Operations, and they bring all the resources and authorities and capabilities that the FBI has with them in a two- or four-person team—whether that's conducting sensitive site exploitation, which is gathering evidence for us, ripping phones or imaging computers and exploiting them, conducting interviews and interrogations, whatever it may be—the litany of skill sets that FBI agents have, all of that is built into one small team that's forward deployed with our partners.

CTC: What would you say was the most challenging aspect of that particular job?

O'Leary: Probably maintaining the skill sets that we developed. All

the different requirements regularly have an agent deployed. They come back, and they're immediately training up in their next cycle on all of those different skill sets—everything from the tactical to the technical, to their language skills or their interview/interrogation skills, getting everything refreshed right before they go into an alert phase. So, trying to maintain the force, have their force readiness always in the forefront because we have a responsibility to be able to address a threat, but also monitoring the welfare of our agents and analysts so that they're not getting burned out over three or four or five years on the team, constantly going. Because the terrorism threat didn't abate; we were constantly sending folks from one place to the next. And it's a relatively small team, so that was really the biggest challenge. And to find people within the FBI who were capable and willing to make that sacrifice for their career, which was going to directly affect their family as well.

CTC: Your most recent position was as the Director of Hostage Rescue and Recovery for the Bureau. That's an interagency assignment and entity, I believe. I imagine that poses a different set of challenges. Can you speak to what some of the most significant ones were?

O'Leary: Much like my job commanding the Counterterrorism Fly Team, the position as Director of Hostage Recovery is, as you highlighted, a very unique billet. So, I was serving as an FBI senior executive under the Counterterrorism Division, sitting above an interagency task force, which was charged with recovering Americans taken hostage by terrorist organizations abroad. The position required myself and my team, this interagency task force, to coordinate not only the tactical responses to a hostage event, [but] we would lead the negotiations, provide support to victims and their families, engage the National Security Council and the interagency, and then, where my FBI role would come in, also deliver justice by supporting FBI investigations and preserving law enforcement prosecutions against the perpetrators.

All of those things don't naturally go together. The National Security Council is policy. DoD is tactics and operations. FBI is law enforcement and investigations. There's always going to be friction points, and each agency has their own internal priorities. Trying to create some kind of synergy of effort was probably the biggest challenge. The way I did it, I just brought in the right team. I was fortunate [that] one of my two deputies was a Special Operations colonel, so he would take the lead in dealing with the Pentagon policy and coordinating tactical response. I had also been fortunate to have a State Department Diplomatic Security Service senior executive as my other deputy, handling the diplomatic coordination and liaison with the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs office. So, building the right team to provide us with that flexibility and connectivity to the broader interagency was probably the best approach.

One of the things we also created while we were there was this initiative called the multilateral fused response. Those of us who've been in counterterrorism and in the hostage recovery business, we all have worked pretty regularly with the interagency, really since General [Stanley] McChrystal created the 'team of teams' concept: It takes a network to defeat a network. And that's just been the norm in my career. Well, acknowledging the fact that a critical hostage crisis could happen where there are victims from multiple countries and the response could be the United States



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alongside our British counterparts or French counterparts, we needed to develop a concept where we responded with unity of effort—synchronizing our tactical response with our partners, our diplomatic engagements, our media messaging, and our negotiations, and everything else that goes into how we respond. Strangely, we actually initiated this the summer before October 7th, and as one of the last things I did in government, we actually ran an exercise in Doha, with the Qataris serving as intermediaries and negotiators. We did that in July of last year. We didn't think it was going to be something exactly like what happened in Israel on October 7th, but we were concerned that—going back to critical incidents like the *Achille Lauro* [hijacking] or TWA 847 [hijacking] or a host of other examples—we were not prepared to respond with our partners in setting some kind of standard out there. And the initiative continues now.

CTC: Given the focus internationally on hostages in the aftermath of October 7th, what are the most important variables for a government to consider when faced with a hostage crisis, specifically one presented by a terrorist actor?

O'Leary: I think the biggest thing to recognize, being a student of terrorism like yourself, is that October 7th is unfortunately going to be a reminder to our adversaries that the tactic of hostage-taking is effective. It's an asymmetric tactic; it provides the terrorist organization—in the case October 7th, Hamas—with the ability to have the leverage and give them the opportunity to endure and possibly survive this struggle with Israel. And all they have to do is survive to potentially win. So, hostage-taking in the last couple of decades, other than ISIS, has been something carried out by groups like JNIM or the Haqqani network, but it was done purposely either for monetary reward, in the case of JNIM, or with the Haqqanis where they were looking for some kind of exchange/negotiated release and that was purposeful. It wasn't traditional hostage-taking in the modern-day terrorism standard. I think Hamas has brought it back to that. And certainly, Hezbollah set a standard in the '80s

and early '90s, too. I think this is going to be a reminder that it works, and Americans and our international partners can have people exposed abroad. So we must have the ability to react either tactically in partnership with our Five Eyes partners or Five Eyes Plus partners, synchronizing our efforts—because the U.S. does not have as many forward-deployed people—and sharing information, sharing capabilities in places where maybe the French are, but the United States isn't or vice versa. Those are the things [where] we need to figure out some kind of way to support each other, to respond to these events, which inevitably are going to continue.

CTC: And because, as you so rightly said, it's seen by these organizations as being an effective tool to use, how did you balance the CT and other considerations when thinking about how to respond to these events? So, for example, you might want to respond in a certain way to meet your counterterrorism objectives, but those actions might conflict with some of the things you talked about earlier like administering justice expeditiously or a certain policy objective that the White House might have or, frankly, the desires of the family members of those taken hostage. How did you balance those potentially competing needs?

O'Leary: So, anything that I did always obviously fell under policy. What is the policy of the U.S. government and what are my authorities conducting my operations? Having said that, what's the most creative way I can solve this problem? And sometimes, it is going back to our playbook. Maybe it's a tactical response. Maybe it's using the exquisite capabilities of our Special Operations forces to gather intelligence and develop a recovery plan, or targeting the network of the terrorist enterprise and working our way in to the captors. We have done this successfully year after year to include on hostage cases that I worked as well. The biggest challenge during my tenure was the pivot away from counterterrorism and towards great power competition. And with that went resources, capabilities, and authorities, which are some of the same resources, capabilities, and authorities that you need for hostage recovery. Many of the collection capabilities have been repositioned to the South China Sea or to Ukraine or other places, so having fewer tools to conduct your operations was very difficult, especially when you're used to having all the tools that you need. That was one of the reasons that we started pivoting towards more of a partnership with our Five Eyes Plus partners, trying to combine our resources and our capabilities and our intelligence collection in different areas where we might not have the collection platforms that we're used to.

The other thing is I always looked at things [from the perspective of] what is best for the hostage. Oftentimes, family members have opinions on how they'd like to see things done. But at the end of the day, I thought the best way to support a family member and to do what's best for the hostage was focus on operational resolution of the problem. We put, during my time in the position, an emphasis on solving the problems operationally as quickly as possible, not letting them drag out and endure. So that was number one. Number two [was] bringing justice for the hostage victims and their families—identifying the people who were responsible for violating U.S. law and taking Americans hostages and bringing them to justice.

And then the third thing we put a lot of effort into was locating people that we knew were deceased, who died during captivity, and trying to bring them back and repatriate them and connect

them with their families. There were a number of efforts, a lot of them in partnership with the Department of Defense, to do that. We did successfully locate Cydney Mizell in Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal from that country. She was taken in 2008, and we successfully brought her home to the United States last summer and reconnected her with her family, which was one of the most challenging and important things our team was able to do.

CTC: If we can go a little bit more local, you spent much of your career protecting New York City from the terrorist threat. I would expect that operating in a complex environment like New York presents both challenges and opportunities from a CT perspective. What were some of the key aspects that we need to consider as we think about future counterterrorism in large urban environments like New York?

O'Leary: I would say the most important thing, going back to General McChrystal, was the 'team of teams' approach. [Some] background on the New York Joint Terrorism Task Force: It was founded in 1980 and essentially took 10 NYPD detectives and partnered them with 10 FBI agents, who collectively had little experience with terrorism at the time. But it was to really address what we would consider now to be a domestic terrorism threat. It was primarily [though] not exclusively FALN, which was a Puerto Rican separatist group [that] had done a string of bombings across the United States in the 1970s, to include a couple of horrific ones in New York City. And then we had some other domestic terrorism actors that perpetrated things like the Brinks armored car robbery. And so, it was recognized that this was far beyond simple crime and needed dedicated individuals to address it. The New York JTTF grew in maturity, experience, and size over time. It is now comprised of roughly 500 Counterterrorism professionals from 50 different agencies, all sitting under one umbrella, led by the FBI but with leadership from across all those other federal, state, and local agencies. And everybody works the problem together. The great thing about terrorism, if there is a great thing, [is it] unifies those practitioners to pull together and not be parochial about how we do it. That's the strength of the Joint Terrorism Task Force concept, which is why the 9/11 Commission insisted that it be spread across the United States after 9/11.

The other part of working New York City, which is also connected to the JTTF, is the multicultural nature of New York. In a big urban environment, you have people from around the world living there. Some may be U.S. citizens; some may not. That can increase the threat at times, but it also gives you access into communities and reach back into host countries that you might not otherwise get. So, having cultural expertise on the JTTF and with some of our partners from NYPD Counterterrorism and Intelligence division, you have true cultural experts with linguistic skills that we can tap into. We also have sources in the communities and access to community leaders that we can reach out to that can partner with us on certain issues. All of those things are important on the international terrorism stage.

On the domestic terrorism side—and half of all FBI counterterrorism cases are domestic terrorism cases now—a large urban environment like New York City presents some challenges no different than a small town in America, just at scale. Freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, all of those things are constitutional rights that need to be protected. But your would-

be domestic terrorism actor uses those to their benefit, so trying to thread the needle on how you can identify what crosses over from freedom of speech to potential radicalization and spreading of ideology, or hate speech crossing over into threat speech and understanding how we can get after it is a challenge. And that's most recently surfaced with the protests on college campuses like Columbia and NYU and other places where people are assembling, the majority of them to support the victims in Gaza, but at the same time, there are people intermingled into those crowds that are overtly talking about supporting Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad or others. And that becomes a challenge to try to identify those people and excise them out of those larger crowds.

CTC: Is there a particular case that you can talk about that was a good example of the type of cooperation and interagency coordination that you described?

O'Leary: I would say the response to the attack on the U.S. mission in Benghazi. Just [as] background, after the attack happened in September of 2012, I was fairly new to the Counterterrorism Fly Team—had only just gotten settled—and a U.S. Special Operations Force was alerted to immediately respond. I led a small, handpicked FBI detachment that responded with them and went into Benghazi, collected evidence, documented the crime scene, gathered information on what had happened, and unfortunately found out that four Americans had died. We brought everything back to the United States and started the investigation, which fell under the New York Joint Terrorism Task Force—which I had just left, running an al-Qa`ida squad there. Because the New York JTTF has extraterritorial jurisdiction for Africa, they led the investigation.

Over time, in partnership with the interagency, the JTTF investigation, and the sharing of information and intelligence, we were able to illuminate the network of people involved in the attack on Benghazi and identify those culpable for the deaths of the U.S. ambassador and the other three American victims. We were then able to start tracking some of these individuals and, over the period of the next couple of years, we conducted two separate joint operations back into Libya with an arrest warrant to take custody of these individuals and bring them back to the United States to face prosecution. So, the combining of resources, capabilities, authorities, information, and intelligence, and the emphasis on partnerships is what's critical because in order to conduct these capture operations, FBI personnel went back into Libya with Special Operations forces to affect an arrest of these individuals. Then we took them out to a U.S. Navy ship and brought them back to the United States to face prosecution. Both prosecutions were successful, and both individuals who were captured [and] prosecuted will serve the rest of their life in jail for carrying out terrorist attacks and killing Americans. The only way that was successful was because of that 'team of teams' approach and the emphasis on partnership.

CTC: As you talked about before, we've transitioned into a period where counterterrorism has taken more of a back seat to strategic competition, given the change in our national defense strategy and broader policy decisions. Given that, the necessity of this team approach seems to be even more important. So, as we think about counterterrorism moving forward, what, in your experience, does it take to operate effectively in those team

situations? Is there something specific about how you interact in or approach those environments that would be particularly important to think about?

O'Leary: I would say, bringing capabilities that somebody else does not have. If you're partnering with U.S. Special Operations forces, which I did quite a bit of over the years, they don't need additional tactical capabilities as they have that thoroughly handled. You of course have to have the requisite tactical skills to be alongside them, but they don't need somebody else to be able to clear a room for them. They need somebody who's capable of conducting FBI investigations and operations. So, bringing something that's value-added to the network that's out there is key. As is a willingness to work with anyone, to partner with anyone, because your goal is to conduct counterterrorism operations, because you have an obligation to do it. It's a massive responsibility and you need to be mission-focused, so it's a mindset. And also, as you go out and partner with some very elite units, you have to bring a standard of excellence with you and the ability to adapt to any environment, exercise some initiative and problem solving to get mission success, sometimes in very austere environments, and also bring a mindset focused on resourcefulness, determination, and resilience. Terrorism investigations and operations are rarely linear and don't happen quickly. Having that creativity and that determination to see things through and have a successful end state is really what it takes.

CTC: I suspect that your comfort operating jointly, as you've talked a lot about already, especially with the military, comes in part from your background as a United States Marine. How did that service impact and prepare you for your future career in the FBI and beyond?

O'Leary: The Marine Corps gave me so much. One of the biggest things they gave me was the humility and willingness to work with anybody and a focus on service and mission success. I took being a Marine as an awesome responsibility. I took being an FBI agent as an equally awesome responsibility and my assignment working counterterrorism as being a real privilege and something that I wasn't going to be just 'pretty good' at. That standard of excellence the Marine Corps gave me that carried on with the FBI allowed me to conduct operations at a level that the American people should expect and demand to prevent the next 9/11. I also think being a Marine, you're under-resourced and you develop a certain level of adaptability to get things done no matter what, to improve your situation every day, making your investigation or your operation more developed each and every day, and having a plan to have success and have an end state. No two counterterrorism cases that I have seen are identical, and there is no simple investigative checklist to work through. As I said, CT investigations are not exactly linear in nature, so you often need to develop creative and adaptive approaches. As a counterterrorism investigator, you are really just limited by your imagination, and the four corners of the Constitution and the attorney general guidelines, but everything else within that is kind of fair game. So having the creativity to conduct an operation that is unique and that's going to have success at the end of the day—not everything's going to be a checklist. Sometimes, it's going to be a little more creative and more adaptable.

CTC: For as long as I've known you, you've always shown an interest in and a commitment to education and academic study as a means to ensure both you and your teams have a firm understanding of the adversary, its ideology, and its motivations. And in fact, you already talked about this in the context of your time with the Fly Team, in making sure your team was prepared to address the threats you faced. But can you dive a little bit deeper into why you think it's an important investment for teams like the ones you led that were directly engaged in the operational fight to gain that level of knowledge?

O'Leary: I've always felt that professional education and developing subject matter proficiency is a critical requirement for successful counterterrorism investigations and operations, and I've been extremely disappointed at the systemic deficiency to develop and deliver the level of training needed by our counterterrorism professionals. Simply put, we have failed to provide those who need the knowledge the right resources over the years. West Point CTC has been a leader in education. Unfortunately, it's not the norm, and I'd like to see it expand. If terrorism is an enduring threat, which it is, and it's still the number-one threat for the FBI, we should make sure that we're providing the resources and capabilities to those who are working it day in, day out. I just haven't seen that, and it's a critical shortfall.

And as we have pivoted towards great power competition, when you have fewer resources to array against what is an entrenched adversary and an enduring threat, the way you counter that is [by] professionalizing your force. And we need to really take that seriously. I look at individuals like [RAND terrorism specialist] Brian Jenkins who we had the opportunity to spend some time with just a few weeks back. With five decades of experience researching terrorism and political violence, Brian Jenkins is a true counterterrorism expert. A lot of people like to assign themselves that title. Very few of them are. Brian Jenkins would not call himself a terrorism expert. At the conference we were just at together, he spent all day, every day there. And he was actually taking notes because he knows that things are constantly changing, and there's too much to know in this space. And he never wanted to be just 'pretty good' at his job. And I never wanted to be just 'pretty good' at my job. I read incessantly on it, and it's been a point of friction with friends and family that I read nothing other than books about terrorism and political violence. It's because that's my profession. It's my vocation, and I wanted to understand it as deeply as I could.

There are lessons to be learned in history. For example, going back to reading about the Orsini bomb being developed and used by Anarchists against Napoleon III in 1858, and how that that capability spread bombings across the anarchist community as a tool, and spread to the People's Will in Russia who successfully assassinated Tsar Alexander II. Studying how this simple utilitarian explosive device and the effective use of violence to effect political change spread across Europe and eventually made it way to U.S. is important to understand. Learning how terrorism and political violence develops and spreads is essential knowledge for any counterterrorism professional. Understanding how terrorism moved into the modern era and the eventual emergence of groups like al-Qa`ida, ISIS, Hezbollah, and Hamas all started with post-World War II and "the right to self-determination." CT professionals who possess this historical knowledge and research curiosity were not surprised when October 7th happened and people were shocked

about the gliders. Like many other counterterrorism researchers and professionals, I quickly remembered that, 'Oh no, it's not the first time that gliders have been used. PFLP used them a couple of times back in the 1980s, and it was a huge embarrassment to the IDF back then.' What's the saying?: If we don't learn from history and learn from our mistakes, we are doomed to repeat them. History repeats itself. We should learn, and I think we're going to see another cyclical effect with terrorism. October 7th has unfortunately demonstrated that hostage-taking works, and terrorism as a tactic works. Hamas was more or less a local movement on October 6, 2023, and now the Palestinian cause is a global movement once again. So, my concern as 9/11 becomes more distant in our rearview mirror, and we pivot towards great power competition, our terrorist adversaries are looking at Hamas' recent success and are being inspired by it. Make no mistake, ISIS is surviving and enduring, and we're going to see a reemergence likely from them. Al-Qa`ida, which almost nobody outside the CT community talks about, was roughly 500 members before September 11th, mostly relegated to Afghanistan, but has swelled its ranks to many times that size and is in two dozen countries around the world now. So, despite our over two decades of fighting terrorism, the problem is worse not better. To succeed in our mission requires generational commitment from leadership and dedicated counterterrorism practitioners studying the problem, learning from it, and trying to develop policies and strategies that are effective and capable for the long term.

CTC: Learning from our adversaries is critical, as you pointed out. Given your experiences with the Fly Team and elsewhere, you've had the opportunity to have a number of face-to-face experiences with some of these individuals. Are there any particular interactions that you found the most surprising or perhaps the most impactful in terms of understanding who these adversaries are?

O'Leary: I've had the unique opportunity to be face-to-face with quite a few high-profile terrorists, but I've also talked to and conducted interviews and interrogations of foot soldiers from al-Qa`ida and ISIS and others, and domestic terrorism actors as well. I think the one thing I take away is you can't paint ideology with broad brushstrokes. Back in the day when it was smaller and stricter, it took some time to become a member of al-Qa`ida. You [had to] really embrace the ideology, and you were vetted. Not that everybody in al-Qa`ida was exactly the same, but a majority of them embraced a certain ideology. That has definitely been diluted over time. They're much bigger. Somebody from JNIM, their ideology is very watered down compared to an old school member of al-Qa`ida from back in the day that grew out of Egyptian Islamic Jihad or something else.

ISIS was interesting in terms of understanding motivations and ideology. No two people that I interviewed traveled to Syria and Iraq for the same reasons. Some were hardcore Islamists who believed in a *takfiri* ideology, but others were opportunists. Some were looking for empowerment, a club patch, to belong to something. Some were looking for a wife or a job. Some were adventurists and some homicidal maniacs and everything in between. So, not all of them were alike. And members of ISIS are drastically different from members of Hamas.

Then on the domestic terrorism problem, you have everything from accelerationists—you know, folks from the Atomwaffen

Division who want to bring the downfall of society—to people from the militia movements or patriot movements who, if you trace back the history of those movements, some of them grew out of legitimate grievances against the government that snowballed over time.

Understanding why people are frustrated, what their grievances [are], what are the push-pull factors that are leading to their radicalization and mobilization towards violence is the key towards countering terrorism and political violence, and that's the thing that I've been trying to get after over the years. The hardcore extremists, you're really never going to be able to break through to them, but there are plenty of people left of that who are on different levels of the ideological spectrum. Understanding what that grievance is and addressing it without a heavy-handed governmental response is a more effective counterterrorism approach than looking at everybody who's a member of a particular group as a nail and we're the hammer all the time. We have to be smarter about our approach to counterterrorism. If we look at everything tactically, with a military response, the problem's going to get worse, not better.

CTC: We've spoken a lot about your past experiences in counterterrorism, but as we look to the future, how do you think the CT fight has changed or is changing as we get further away from seminal events like 9/11 and deeper into what is perhaps a more complex international security situation?

O'Leary: I think as we have recalled a lot of our forward-deployed CT forces it will have a measurable negative impact on many of the partnerships that we built and developed and sustained for a long time. In our absence, our partners' ability to conduct unilateral CT operations will be challenged and our relationship with them will become strained at the very time when we need more reliance on some of those partners. So, you should look at CT strategy in partnership with great power competition and reinvest in our critical partners. [There are] some regions around the world that you can look at—the Sahel is one of them, but certainly the Middle East right now with what's going on there as well—that are spiraling out of control. To create regional stability, creating functional CT partners that can maintain their own security and stability is really what we want so that the U.S. can have some level of retrenchment. But we went from handling all the CT threats around the world to rapidly withdrawing with no transition plan. That quick pivot from CT-focused to GPC left a void that was going to be filled by someone. And we saw that happen in Mali, and you can see the instability in the Sahel and the growth of JNIM and ISIS-GS because of that. After the U.S. and France retrograded, Russia's Wagner PMC pushed in there, and there are functionally no constraints on what JNIM and ISIS are doing. They're spreading like wildfire. The Sahel is particularly concerning because terrorist organizations historically flourish in locations that have failed or semi-failed states and ungoverned space, and that defines the Sahel. There's nothing countering that right now and no way to push back in. Wagner obviously is not going to be an effective stabilizing force.

So, the U.S. can look at those things and come up with a different approach. We have plenty of resources to have an effective counterterrorism strategy, but we have traditionally looked at it in almost that tactical lens only. We need to create an interagency approach where we are effectively synchronizing multiple effects from across the U.S. government. Things like aid from USAID, training from State Department ATA, investigative support and

mentorship from the FBI and DOJ, Department of Defense Special Forces advising and assisting, and so on—all those things we have in our toolkit, but I've never seen them synchronized well.

It's the idea of smart power: still having military and tactical capabilities, but really bringing—and I hate to use the term because it's somewhat a dirty word at times—a whole-of-government approach. For a country that developed and enacted the Marshall Plan, we can do this. We can create stability and security and governance and fight back the spread of extremism, *and* in the new Cold War fight back great power competitors at the same time. We have done that before. Counterterrorism and great power competition and a synchronized interagency approach, that kind of defines what we did in the '60s, '70s, and '80s as a country. Just go back, dust off that playbook, somebody like Brian Jenkins probably still has it because he wrote it.

CTC: I also wonder about the role of technology in all of this, both in terms of how we can make better use of technology to address some of the issues you're talking about, but also how we handle our adversaries' innovative use of technology to achieve their objectives. What are your thoughts on how we address the technological aspect of this?

O'Leary: I'd say, fighting off complacency and not running counterterrorism investigations the way we ran them in the past, and understanding that new technologies [are] developing every day. Our adversaries are innovative and adaptive. October 7th took Israel by surprise because they underestimated the ingenuity and innovative mindset of their adversary; they underestimated them.

We have to understand what their capabilities are, and understand the spread of technology, things of concern like 3D printing and AI. We have to figure out ways to counter them. On the domestic threat, we also need to really think about laws and policies that don't infringe upon constitutionally protected rights, but close loopholes that allow individuals who are members of Atomwaffen Division or other extremist groups to build ghost guns like it's a routine thing. A lot of these extremist organizations never need to walk into a gun store to buy a legal firearm. They have the capability to make it themselves, either through ghost guns or 3D printing, so being able to counter that I think is important. But because we're an interconnected, globalized world, you could have somebody sitting in one country printing a 3D component for a firearm or drone for somebody half the world away.

We need to bring together CT professionals and folks from technology industries and come up with solutions to some of these problems, because again, one of the unifying things with counterterrorism is, in my experience, everybody usually pulls together to solve problems, whether from different agencies, from our international partners, or the public-private partnership, which I think is one of the places we need to go. We've had very good partnerships with a lot of the social media and Silicon Valley giants. Some of it has been challenging at times, but for the most part they've been very good partners. But there's a lot more that we need to do together, and we also have to figure out ways to attack some of the other, more nefarious social media platforms like Telegram and Gab and 4Chan and some of the others. Because these are platforms that people gather on, they recruit, they radicalize, they come up with operational plans and there's no absolute way to counter all of these right now, other than trying to have our own people in some of

these chat rooms, and the bandwidth problem of that alone would make it impossible.

CTC: As we think about how to prevent acts of terrorism in this environment, are there any key variables or key lessons that you think we are missing or not talking about enough?

O'Leary: The big thing is that we've had a singular approach in many ways over the last couple of decades, which has been very tactically focused and military-led, which is an important component, but we've been trying to attack terrorism head on militarily in conflict zones. And then when the threat has spread outside of those conflict zones, we've been somewhat anemic in addressing it. We've used law enforcement tools at times, but it has not been effective to the scale that we need it to be. So, I would say focusing on the things that have worked and the interagency approach is critical here in the United States. And then we need a partnered approach with our key allies, supporting and enabling other countries to address the terrorism threat in their own country without us forward-deploying massive resources.

We're not going to solve terrorism. The title of the Global War on Terrorism is somewhat a misnomer. Terrorism is a tactic of violence and an enduring problem. So, we need to develop a strategy and policies that can mitigate the threat, preventing the next 9/11, but can be adjusted over time and sustained over time without costing U.S. taxpayers a fortune. We have to strike the balance. And we also need to develop clearly defined policies. The current U.S. policy against international terrorism is kind of loosely defined, whereas in the past it was very well-structured. The Biden administration has put out a domestic terrorism policy, but I would hope to see whoever steps into the White House refocus on our transnational threat as well, and develop a very defined policy with the right authorities spelled out on how and why we have to continue to address the threat. Because if we become complacent, we will absolutely have another tragic event, whether it's another USS Cole bombing, East Africa embassy bombing, Benghazi attack, Boston Bombing, or another 9/11. Violence will come to us if we let down our guard. Our adversaries are intent on using terrorism to do us harm, and we must remain committed to stopping them. **CTC**