A View from the CT Foxhole: Christine Abizaid, Former Director, National Counterterrorism Center

By Sean Morrow, Don Rassler, and Briar Bundy

Christine Abizaid served as director of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) from June 2021 to July 2024. She was the eighth Senate-confirmed Director and the first woman to lead NCTC, the primary U.S. intelligence organization that integrates, analyzes, and shares terrorism information. During the Obama administration, she was appointed by the Secretary of Defense as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia and served on the National Security Council as both Director for Counterterrorism and Senior Policy Advisor to President Obama's Assistant for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism.

Christine began her career as a counterterrorism analyst at the Defense Intelligence Agency's Joint Intelligence Task Force for Combatting Terrorism where she focused on the Middle East and South Asia, deploying several times to the Middle East alongside the U.S. military.

She has received the National Intelligence Distinguished Service Medal; the Central Intelligence Agency Director's Award; the Office of the Director of National Intelligence Award; the National Military Intelligence Association John T. Hughes Award; and the DIA Meritorious Civilian Service Award.

CTC: Before we begin, you have always been a great friend to the CTC, and we have such appreciation for the trust that NCTC put in us to share your team's vision of calibrated counterterrorism in this publication in August 2023.[1] So, thank you again.

Abizaid: Let me just say that the article we published through you guys was actually pretty game-changing for the NCTC cadre. We don't do a lot of stuff in public. We don't have our voice out there, and so thank you all very much for helping facilitate that. I think it's really important that an organization like NCTC, which is built to do information sharing, does it in public as well as on the classified side.

CTC: Starting with operations, what is your assessment of the jihadi threat in Africa, particularly the Sahel and in Somalia? Do you have concerns about the ability of that violence to be exported, or are those largely regional threats?

Abizaid: So, on the threat of terrorism in Africa, I will say that coming back to the counterterrorism world in 2021, after having done it for the better part of my career after 9/11 until I left the Department of Defense in 2016, the most striking change was the rise of terrorism in Africa, and in particular, the exploitation by both al-Qa`ida and ISIS in different parts of the African continent in a way that I think challenged a lot of our paradigms. We had been dealing with the counterterrorism threat as a primarily Middle East/South Asia-based threat for so long, that seeing groups like JNIM spread and seeing al-Shabaab sustain itself, seeing ISIS form branches and affiliates in various parts of the continent, really just showed the degree to which those groups saw opportunity in undergoverned spaces and expansion on that continent. It's a challenge for us from a counterterrorism perspective that's different from what we had been dealing with in decades prior, in large part because our relationships are different on the continent. Yes, we had long-standing interest in and relationships in East Africa and I think we were better positioned there to understand the battle space. I think you see that even today in the kind of counterterrorism operations that are being pursued in Somalia against al-Shabaab, and, increasingly, ISIS. But in West Africa, we're dealing with a different operational environment, where partnership opportunities are increasingly limited because of the backsliding of democratic governments in that region.

And so when you look at the trends, particularly in the Sahel, and considering JNIM's territorial gain, the presence of ISIS affiliates there—sometimes in conflict with JNIM but still exploiting this undergoverned space—you look at the degree to which U.S. efforts in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali have been stymied by anti-West perceptions and changes in government. You just have a dynamic where I think over the next decade or so, we should be quite concerned about what could emerge from the growing terrorism foothold. And then the concern is always: Once terrorists have time and space and territory, what are they going to do with it? Will they stay regional, or will they go transnational? We saw in Syria that transnational aims eventually are born out of that time and space. We saw that in Afghanistan. And so, the concern, particularly around the Sahel, is what is currently a regional threat could become a transnational one, and that because our relationships are so frayed and our collection environment is so difficult, our ability to predict when that regional to transnational transition occurs is very limited. Unless we're ready to invest in significant intelligence infrastructure, a significant operational infrastructure in a part of the world that's vast territorially and where partnerships are at a very immature stage, I've got real concerns about what could emerge from there in the decades to come.

CTC: Shifting from operations to strategy, the Presidential Policy Memorandums and Presidential Policy Guidance during the Obama administration and the Biden administration regarding high-value targeting (HVT) outside of war zones had a significant impact on the CT fight. Could you share how those documents impacted policy and operations in your tenure?

Abizaid: I was part of exercising both administrations' policy process governing direct action operations against terrorist targets outside of areas of active hostilities. The theory in the Obama

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administration and carried through in the Biden administration was that we have a global threat that needs addressing, but we need a disciplined and senior-level process to ensure we've carefully weighed whether our capabilities should be deployed outside of declared war zones against individuals that pose a continuing, imminent threat to Americans.

At the time the policy was first contemplated, al-Qa`ida, in particular, was a global threat, with operatives plotting from places where we were not actively at war, but we still needed to get after them. We had the capability, so it wasn't a question of whether we could, it was a question of whether we should. John Brennan, President Obama's CT Advisor at the time, was running point on these types of high-value-target decisions, and had a great sense of what the president should consider before green-lighting any operation. Eventually, the president challenged John to institutionalize his deliberative framework and put in place a policy that would make sure that we were thinking critically as national security professionals about what threats demand that we use our significant operational capability in non-traditional circumstances.

The policy has gotten criticism for being heavily process-oriented. There's a perception that it has slowed down operators from making decisions on the ground. But again, these operators were engaging outside of traditional war zones. For all of the criticism around the policy process, it's actually something I think many of us in both the Obama and the Biden administrations are proud to have pursued because it required of us as a national security team a high level of discipline as we considered how to apply incredible capability against the most critical threats to the United States.

We'd ask ourselves key questions: How serious is the threat to the United States from this group and/or individual? Is there a capable partner force in the area who can help mitigate the threat? Does this require unilateral U.S. action? What kind of operation is necessary? Is it feasible to do a capture operation? Does it require an airstrike? Are there civilians in the area? How do we protect civilians during the operation? Can we credibly determine that those individuals that we are targeting present a continuing and imminent threat to the United States and can't be dealt with in any other way? I think the policy discipline, the level of analytic rigor that underpinned these discussions was some of the best work that the United States government did in our counterterrorism fight. Yes, it was frustrating for operators. But it never endangered them. It was always responsive to the threat, with built-in procedures for urgent circumstances. If you do it right as a policy community, you set operators up for more freedom rather than less, while still adhering to your principle of allowing policy debate and ensuring rigor behind your decisions. Balancing operational freedom while also having clarity from a policy perspective about why and what you are doing with the capabilities we have is, in my opinion, a really good use of national security time.

And so, for all the process frustrations that come with anything you have to do with the White House, I actually think that we created a framework that we can be proud of as Americans that balanced both operational need and sound policy decision making.

CTC: The idea being that an operator might have to wait just a little bit longer, but knowing that the decision they'll get from our policymakers and leaders is reinforced with rigor and data and debate. I think that's something that makes them feel good in the long term, even if there's some short-term frustration. In a world of dwindling resources, you want to make sure that you've had that policy discussion grounded in rigor and that you're applying the highest ROI you can.

Abizaid: Absolutely. You had to have that conversation about what to pursue with limited resources, right? We didn't use only this process for that, but it certainly came up during those discussions. We have limited airborne ISR, we have limited strike capacity that can reach various parts of the world, we have a range of threat actors and associated plotting against the United States, and so this also becomes a cost-benefit analysis of how you use your precious resources to best effect when you're dealing with a diverse array of threats. That's a good conversation to have, and having a policy process to force a disciplined discussion, I think, is just good government.

CTC: The whole community right now is thinking about what it means for cartels to be designated as foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) and some of these policies about targeting in non-combat zones or non-conflict areas. Can you share some of your initial thoughts on how we pursue cartels in Latin America as terrorist organizations?

Abizaid: My basic take on the FTO designation of cartels is that it's nice to have, but not necessary for any of the other kind of operational conversations you want to pursue. It certainly has a signaling benefit, and there are some additional and more widespread legal penalties or harsher criminal codes that you can apply to those that end up knowingly working with the cartels, and so there's benefit, but beyond that, the value is marginal. The cartels were already designated transnational criminal organizations, with many penalties mirroring what an FTO designation confers. While the FTO designation may signal an aggressive posture, it doesn't technically change your operational options in a material way. Now, separate from an FTO designation, there is a fair debate about how best to degrade cartels and their lethal fentanyl operations. Any decision to conduct unilateral operations in Mexico becomes really complicated, and based on what I've seen reported in the press, the current administration is wrestling with those complications. My own bias is that if you're going to undertake a long-term operational campaign to deal with a significant network threat in any country, then your best bet is to do that partnered with that country. Whether that partnership eventually includes any kind of kinetic capability is something that, ideally, you've engaged with the partner on. Unilateral U.S. kinetic operations should be a last resort.

In the cartel fight, I think there are a lot of steps that we can take in collaboration with our Mexican counterparts, who have been good CT partners over the years, to deal with a very different fentanyl threat. During the last administration, we spent a lot of time at NCTC, at the request of the DNI and the White House, looking at the ways in which our approach to the counterterrorism threat could inform the counternarcotics mission, in particular the fentanyl threat. Our work in CT has been heavily intelligence-driven, and there are a lot of lessons learned that can apply to the counter-fentanyl effort. Whether that's developing a common intelligence picture about the threat; examining the vulnerabilities that underpin threat networks; increasing information sharing across agencies; or producing assessments that then inform the operations that you would pursue to mitigate the threat. And so, I think there are a lot of good lessons learned embedded in our counterterrorism engagements over the last couple of decades that should and are being applied in the counternarcotics space.

CTC: There also seems to be some interesting literature from the terrorism studies side about leadership decapitation and the effect that might have on things splintering and what that might mean in a cartel context.

Abizaid: In my very surface-level look at this, the way that cartels operate—the attrition rate of senior level folks and then the ability to backfill them and continue on—it creates a resilience that raises questions about the efficacy of an HVT strategy. This fight is, in many ways, against an international logistics and business network. Whether leadership decapitation has a more meaningful impact than going after illicit finances, interdicting global precursor shipments, disrupting the logistics networks, and the like is a real question. My bias is there's a lot more impact from these other types of operations, rather than relying too heavily on a military HVT strategy.

CTC: A key priority when you were the director of NCTC that remains a key priority is the evolution of ISK as a threat. How do you assess it, and when you think about that network's evolution, what are your lessons with respect to how we've been trying to approach it?

Abizaid: For me, the ISIS-K threat out of South and Central Asia was one of the most concerning developments over the tenure of my time at NCTC. I think there's a lot of speculation that this all flows from our withdrawal from Afghanistan, but I actually don't think that's right. I actually think the group got stronger outside of Afghanistan because of the pressure the Taliban put them under. It was pushed out of Afghanistan-based safe havens and then rebuilt in a way that coincided with a couple of things: They found new permissive environments in the region; they virtually connected in ways that are just very hard to detect given the ubiquity of today's encryption technology; they improved their propaganda in various languages—especially connecting with a wide diaspora Central Asians whose travel patterns were disrupted by the war against Ukraine. That combination of things in late 2023 and early 2024 resulted in ISIS-K being able to pose an increasingly significant threat. And that meant that 2024 was a really big year for us to get ahead of where ISIS-K was going. We saw the attack in Kerman, Iran, first of all, then another attack abroad in Moscow with the Crocus City arson and shooting attack. But then we also saw threats proliferate in Europe. We saw attacks and disruptions in Turkey of a similar nature. We had a lot of concerns around the Paris Olympics and whether we had a full understanding of how this threat was shaping up. And so, we redoubled our efforts against this widespread, largely virtual, but also physical network that ISIS-K was cultivating both in the region and globally. That included an investment in counterterrorism cooperation with South and Central Asian partners, with European partners. You saw press reporting about outreach to the Russians and the Iranians. We worked to build international attention on this latest version of an Islamic State threat. When I saw the arrest in Pakistan of Jafar (Mohammad Sharifullah), one of the individuals responsible for the HKIA bombing in 2021 that killed 13 U.S. service members and scores of Afghans,[2] that to me was a sign of the investment that we made in CT cooperation against this threat.

I don't know where we are in terms of the current state of the ISIS-K threat. I am always going to be concerned about how much they are able to go to ground and then reemerge given their special blend of virtual and physical collaboration across the globe. Their ability to tap into disaffected populations who have traveled to different parts of the world, whether that's in the United States or Europe or otherwise is something we've got to watch. ISIS-K is representative of why the United States requires a coordinated and sustainable approach to counterterrorism, a community that's always looking for the next version of the threat and finding ways to highlight that threat and really push the policy community to deal with that threat before it risks American lives.

CTC: When you think about technology and its intersection with terrorism, are there particular types of technologies or areas where you have concerns or are more concerned? On the flip side, when it comes to counterterrorism, given the time you spent in the community and your role at NCTC, where do you think we've been with respect to utilizing technology to evolve the counterterrorism enterprise and where do you see that going?

Abizaid: First, technology is always going to influence the threat. As technological capability becomes more available, becomes democratized, especially with the advent of general-purpose AI, drones, or other technologies, terrorists will be no different than the rest of society—they will seek ways to use it to their advantage. And so, understanding the specific ways in which they're trying to use them and then getting ahead of them is really an intelligence problem. Two specific technologies of concern, for example: drone technology and technology to improve the spread of propaganda. On drones, I had left the counterterrorism community at a time when we cornered the market on drone capability and drone operations; I came back at a time where drones were ubiquitous. The capability proliferated across a lot of different actors, legitimate and illegitimate.

Just look at the threat from the Iranians and their provision of their most sophisticated Group 3 drone capability to their proxies. That proliferation threatened Israel and the U.S. military footprint across the Middle East. Other less sophisticated groups were also getting better and better at capitalizing on Group 1 and 2 level drones for their own benefit, with no need for state-provided capabilities because generally available technology was enabling them to innovate and tailor drones for their own purposes.

Meanwhile, on the less kinetic side of things, I was very concerned about how technological evolution was being exploited by terrorists to produce more slick, sophisticated, and addictive content to recruit, radicalize, and mobilize the next generation. This was particularly problematic after October 7th, when certain individuals became more susceptible to extremist messaging. As much as we talked about al-Qa`ida or ISIS or Iranian-sponsored groups, today's threat is significantly characterized by the actions of individuals who are mobilized to violence after being exposed to horrific content online. I think it's really concerning and something we've got to stay on top of.

Now, you ask how the United States government should benefit from this technology in its fight against terrorism. There are certainly efforts across the intelligence community to make better use of information and technology to improve our understanding of the threat, aid in threat detection and discovery, and deter threats from terrorists worldwide. That said, I do not think we, as an intelligence community, are fully leveraging the opportunity that open source and commercially acquired information provides. As an IC, we should be thinking about precious resources and efficiently using our most sophisticated and exquisite intelligence capabilities on issues only we can service. We should avoid replicating what's already available in the open-source environment, while also leveraging it to enrich our understanding of the world at large. There's a lot of debate in the intelligence community about open-source information, about commercially acquired information, and there are good reasons to have debate, particularly given privacy and civil liberty issues. But we have got figure out how to better integrate the classified and unclassified environments. If we don't do it effectively, I think there is a real threat to the way we do business and our value proposition.

I was just at the International Spy Museum last night—I love that place—and they have just unveiled an open-source intelligence virtual experience about the war in Ukraine. It reinforces this idea of Ukraine as one of the first wars enabled by open-source intelligence and how important it has been that regular people are involved in helping understand the threat picture and informing the way in which Ukraine has defended itself.

CTC: You have strong familiarity and understanding of Pakistan from your time as a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense. Recently, India blamed Lashkar-e-Taiba for the massacre in Kashmir. This is a great reminder of how a VEO action could impact strategic competition. What's your assessment of the threat posed by LeT?

Abizaid: In my tenure as NCTC Director, LeT was not a dominant feature of our conversations, particularly because it was not a significant threat to Americans. LeT had become a much more regionalized threat, but also, my sense of the relationship between Pakistan and LeT was that it had changed quite a bit over time. But my reaction to the claim that LeT was responsible for the recent terrorist attack in Kashmir—an attack that almost launched a major conflict between two nuclear-armed powers—was that it was a reminder that as much as we want terrorist groups and non-state actors not to matter in a world of strategic competition, they can still significantly shape international affairs and derail the best laid plans of even the most powerful nation states.

It's not all that dissimilar to what happened after Hamas' October 7th attack. Here's another group that we didn't spend a lot of time on from the perspective of the threat it posed to the United States, and yet, all of a sudden it conducts an attack that draws us back into the Middle East in a significant way and distracts us, once again, from our pivot to Asia. Again, there is an enduring need to understand terrorism in all its forms because of the strategic surprise that can occur even after an unsophisticated attack. It is something that we've just got to be constantly vigilant of. We saw it on 9/11, we saw it with ISIS' reemergence in 2014 in Mosul; we saw it on October 7th; and we almost saw it here recently in Kashmir. We've just got to stay on our toes.

CTC: That's a theme we discuss with cadets so often here, that perhaps a group isn't going to pose a threat to our nation, to the survival of our nation, but it's certainly going to pose a threat to our attention, our resources, and our political will.

Abizaid: Yeah, it's this really hard thing that we tried to balance. We spent a lot of time trying to narrow our focus to only those most urgent threats to Americans. If a group wanted to conduct attacks against Americans, they were going to go to the top of our list. And yet, a group that wasn't necessarily interested in attacking Americans set off a chain of events in the Middle East that caused one of biggest strategic challenges for us as a country over the last couple of years. So, how you balance the clear-cut, near and present threats of today against the threats that could emerge in the future in a way that is unexpected is a really important piece of what the counterterrorism community is going to have to deal with over time.

CTC: We talked a little bit about this, but just to pick up on the Iran threat a little bit more. Iran, as a state sponsor of terrorism, continues to be a major concern for the U.S. government, and this is an evolving problem. How can the United States address the rising threat from state-backed, non-state actors, and are there any CT lessons learned from your time at the Defense Intelligence Agency, National Security Council, or NCTC about what's worked well for that particular type of threat?

Abizaid: My combined time in the counterterrorism world would tell you that as much as you think that the conditions are right for Iran to give up its ties to terrorist groups, as much as it's obviously in their interest to no longer back non-state actors who will use violence against civilians and other enemies, Iran is going to continue to do it. And actually, they're going to get more creative about how they do it and find new ways hide their hand. And so, whether it's maximum pressure or nuclear negotiations or whatever incentive and punishment structure you pursue, Iran will keep as a mainstay of its strategy the idea of asymmetric warfare, meted out through intermediaries, proxies, surrogates, or whatever flavor of actor they find useful. We just can't be naive about the degree to which they'll continue their relationship with non-state actors.

Iran's proxies are, for the most part, in bad shape. Look at the degree to which the Israelis degraded Hezbollah. Hamas' leadership has been dismantled. The Assad regime's collapse in Syria complicates Iran's connectivity to proxies. The Iraqi Shi`a militants that Iran has cultivated are trying to figure out what operations are in their own interests, distinct from Iranian direction. On balance, the Iranians look to be in one of the worst states I've seen in a long time. And yet, I don't think their reliance on non-state actors as a tool of Iranian statecraft is going away anytime soon. Now, I think there are interesting mid-term questions about the trajectory of Iran's closest proxies. How will the post-October 7 environment influence the Houthis; what happens to Hezbollah after Nasrallah; etc. But the challenges do not mean that the Iranians are ready to give up on their asymmetric assets.

CTC: It might actually push them to rely more on some of these entities, just given their weaker position.

Abizaid: I think that's right. Take, for example, Iran's targeting of dissidents worldwide or former U.S. government officials blamed for the Soleimani assassination. They're kind of willing to work with anybody, right? Mexican drug cartels or Azeri criminal networks. We even saw some disruptions in Europe tied to Sunni extremists. They'll get more creative about how to distance themselves from the attackers so they can retain plausible deniability. But they are not likely to give up on state-sponsored terrorism as a core strategic lever.

CTC: Throughout the course of your career since starting in intelligence at the Joint Intelligence Task Force for Combatting Terrorism, after 9/11 through your last role as director of NCTC, what is the most significant change that you have seen in the terrorism threat landscape facing the United States?

Abizaid: I think it really is this domination of the threat environment by individual actors versus just the highly organized, hierarchical groups like al-Qa`ida and ISIS. It's made for less sophisticated attacks in many ways, but it's also made for attackers that are harder to detect and deter. You've seen this from actors espousing a diverse array of ideologies, all pursuing tactics that make it very difficult as an intelligence problem to track and get ahead of. And so, I think it is this rise of an empowered individual actor inspired by the kinds of things that they consume online that makes a higher number of threats present all at the same time. One of the things I was constantly trying to understand while at NCTC was not just how many attacks occurred in a year, but how many disruptions occurred in a year and what did the disruption environment tell us about the sustainability of the threat, where it was highest, why it persisted, etc. The disruption environment is a really active indicator of what the threat is and what kind of international counterterrorism community is needed to keep the threat at bay.

CTC: Earlier, you referenced the International Spy Museum. Last fall, in your conversation with the museum's executive director, Chris Costa, you mentioned that after October 7th, many other terrorist actors might have opened up the potential for terror groups to work together and create convergence of ideologies in light of common adversaries.[3] Do you think the benefits to these groups are more in recruiting and fundraising, or in alliances or collectives?

Abizaid: I do expect that groups have benefitted in terms of recruitment and fundraising. I think there is also a possibility of greater collaboration, especially when groups are under pressure and need to find new ways to sustain themselves. Right after October 7th, the way that we saw different kinds of groups react to that singular event was really terrifying. I mean, whether it was racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists or al-Qa`ida or ISIS or other Palestinian terrorist groups, you just had a celebration and admiration across the board. And this exposure to a new audience of terrorism as an effective tool for political grievance, that really concerned me. And so, groups like ISIS, which always thought Hamas was full of apostates because they were aligned with Iran, were probably able to capitalize on the international attention from a terrorist attack to find people to recruit to their own cause. That attack created a whole new audience and the question for me is, what will be the lasting impact? What terrorist groups and actors will form after October 7th that didn't exist before it?

I think that October 7th will have a decades-long impact on the terrorism environment going forward. The specific way in which that shakes out, the formality of the alignments, the emergence of new groups, the degree to which new individuals are now exposed and then motivated to violence on their own, remains to be seen. But I think we're going to be living with the effects well outside of Israel and the Palestinian territories for years to come.

CTC: We've discussed a little bit about ISK, the threat from individuals, and we talked a little bit about cartels. Now we'd like to ask you about the June 2024 arrest of the eight Tajiks affiliated with the Islamic State here in the United States.[4] What lessons do you think we learned from that episode, and what lessons do you think we should be learning in terms of that development?

Abizaid: That development was probably one of the most concerning threats to the homeland over my tenure as NCTC Director. It was concerning for a couple of reasons, but one of the most important was the degree to which we didn't understand the ties to ISIS until they were already here in the country. There's always a lot of debate about how porous the southwest border is and whether terrorists are exploiting that border. Actually, in the history of terrorist threats to the United States homeland, the southwest border does not feature prominently as a major threat vector. This threat was the first time where the border seemed to have been exploited by these Tajik actors. Now, there are a lot of questions

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about their radicalization pathway and what exactly they were planning. And I mean, if you look at it, they were sent [back] to their home countries without terrorism charges, right? So, there's still a lot of open questions about what depth of threat they represented. But given the rise of ISIS-K, given that outreach to particularly Central Asians through slick propaganda in their own hard-to-translate language, these individuals raised a number of concerns. The threat demanded that we collaborate as an interagency in ways we'd never collaborated before to make sure that we were bringing all available tools and authorities to protect against it.

If you think about it, a threat like this required FBI, DHS, CIA, NGA, NSA, DoD, NCTC, State, and various others to respond to the emergence of these individuals in the United States homeland not just from a homeland security perspective, but also from an international security perspective. To detect and counter the threat, we needed to operate as multi-faceted counterterrorism community that would do everything we could to deal not just with the threat that these individuals potentially posed inside the U.S. homeland, but also the international networks from which they were derived.

And so, the lesson learned from that is that your CT community not only has to be well resourced and engaged in constant vigilance against our threats, but they also have to be highly collaborative, and that collaboration is actually what enables you to detect and disrupt the threats. The CT business is still a needles-in-the-haystack business; it's still one piece of information that can open up a whole new threat network. You have to be digging into and accessing multiple sources of information, collaborating with multiple partners who see things in different ways, and if you're not doing that, you're not running your counterterrorism enterprise effectively. And so, the lesson learned after 9/11 was about collaboration and communication across a diverse set of community actors; that is just reinforced by the emergence of this most recent threat. It's this collaboration, this understanding of how the enterprise can and should work together against terrorist threats that I'm most worried about atrophying in a time of reduced resources. Whoever is leading the counterterrorism effort in the future really needs to pay attention to how that system must work together to prevent the next attack.

CTC: That is a good segue to our closing question. Looking out at the next 10 years of possible terrorist threats, what actors, regions, or trends are you most worried about? Maybe even perhaps in the context of 2026 FIFA World Cup and LA 2028 Olympics, what are we well equipped to handle? And what do we still need to really improve on moving forward?

Abizaid: Well, we cannot be complacent. So no matter what, as much as strategic competition has to be the number-one national security priority, as much as we are concerned about 2027 and Taiwan and what that might mean for what is required in the United States, as much as we're looking at major trends in the Middle East or war in Europe, we cannot take our eye off the ball from a counterterrorism perspective. We cannot get complacent. Even though terrorism isn't the number-one thing we are focused on as a whole, the United States government, the counterterrorism community needs to be well-resourced and ever vigilant against a persistent threat.

That seems obvious to say to the community of CT practitioners most likely to read this, but it's important to reinforce. There is a tendency in the United States government to shift resources away from every other priority in service of a main priority. But we need to walk and chew gum at the same time. Avoiding strategic surprise, protecting against that next threat, just requires a sustainable investment in a community of professionals whose only job is to focus on CT and to tell policymakers when it's time to take action against our worst terrorist adversaries. That mission requires the constant vigilance and collaboration across a diverse community of good actors so we can prevent a diverse community of bad actors from harming Americans. CTC

Citations

1 See NCTC's Senior Analysts, "Calibrated Counterterrorism: Actively Suppressing," *CTC Sentinel* 16:8 (2023).

2 Editor's Note: Abubakar Siddique, "Pakistan's Arrest Of Islamic State Operative Signals Renewed U.S. Cooperation," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 5, 2025.

3 "Spy Chat with Chris Costa - Guest: Christine Abizaid," International Spy Museum, September 16, 2024.

4 See Julia Ainsley, Tom Winter, Andrew Blankstein and Antonio Planas, "8 suspected terrorists with possible ISIS ties arrested in New York, L.A. and Philadelphia, sources say," NBC News, June 11, 2024.