

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

CHRISTOPHER A. LANDBERG

Acting Principal Deputy Coordinator for Counterterrorism
Bureau of Counterterrorism

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM Subcommittee on National Security

“Examining the Worldwide Threat of al Qaeda, ISIS, and Other Foreign Terrorist Organizations”

Date: Tuesday, December 7, 2021 - 9:30 a.m.

Location: 2154 Rayburn House Office Building

Chairman Lynch, Ranking Member Grothman, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today. I am here to discuss the State Department’s efforts to counter the evolving terrorist threats around the world.

The United States and international community are confronting a terrorist threat landscape that is more dynamic, complex, and fast-moving than ever before. Foreign/overseas terrorist groups remain a persistent and pervasive threat, despite the significant progress we have made in degrading their ability to directly threaten the U.S. Homeland.

Globally, ISIS and al-Qa’ida (AQ) have proven to be resilient and determined, responding to increased counterterrorism pressure by adapting their tactics and techniques. ISIS’s global presence continues to grow despite the liberation of territory it once controlled in Iraq and Syria. ISIS is leveraging its branches and networks across the Middle East, Asia, and Africa to advance its agenda. ISIS’s affiliates are increasing the volume and lethality of their attacks, particularly in West and Central Africa, causing more fatalities by ISIS affiliates in Africa in 2020 than in any previous year.

AQ also continues to pose a serious threat and has branches – notably AQ in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and al-Shabaab – that are quite capable of inflicting damage on our allies and on our global interests. AQ’s networks continue to exploit local grievances in under-governed spaces, conflict zones, and security gaps in the Middle East and Africa to acquire resources and conduct terrorist attacks. This remains the case despite the significant losses of leadership and degraded capacity to execute large scale attacks that AQ has suffered.

Countering terrorist threats remains at the forefront of the Biden-Harris Administration’s priorities. The United States’ global counterterrorism engagement is a whole-of-government effort, with the Department of Defense, the Intelligence Community, and USAID, among other agencies, all playing important roles. Today, I will focus my remarks on what the State Department is doing to protect the United States, and our people, interests, and allies from terrorists.

State Department Efforts to Counter Terrorism

The State Department is taking concrete and specific actions to counter the complex and evolving terrorist threats worldwide. We play a critical role in the U.S. government's efforts to promote counterterrorism cooperation, strengthen partnerships, and build civilian capacity to counter the full spectrum of terrorist threats confronting the United States and our allies. This includes bolstering the professionalism and capability of partner nation's law enforcement to identify, deter, prevent, disrupt, apprehend, investigate, prosecute, and convict terrorists and their supporters, including through support for key regional and multilateral institutions and global initiatives.

Diplomatic & Multilateral Engagements

We use a broad range of tools to advance these efforts and counter terrorist threats such as ISIS and AQ. First, the State Department is leading the U.S. Government's diplomatic engagements with key partners to ensure broad international counterterrorism support and assistance. For example, we continue to prioritize the enduring threat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, urging countries to repatriate their nationals from the region, including thousands of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) and foreign families who remain in detention or in displaced persons camps. The State Department is leading the U.S. Government's diplomatic engagement and logistical coordination to repatriate these FTFs and foreign families, working closely with the interagency and international partners to successfully repatriate hundreds of FTFs and associated family members to their countries of origin for rehabilitation, reintegration, and prosecution, as appropriate.

Similarly, the State Department leverages multilateral fora, including but not limited to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS (D-ISIS Coalition), the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), NATO, INTERPOL, and the UN, to strengthen international counterterrorism efforts. Through the D-ISIS Coalition, for instance, we are leading the international diplomatic campaign against the global threat of ISIS. One of our dedicated efforts has been to expand the D-ISIS Coalition's focus beyond Iraq and Syria to include ISIS threats in Africa and elsewhere. Last week, the D-ISIS Coalition announced the launch of its Africa Focus Group, which will enable the Coalition to undertake civilian capacity-building programs to help address the ISIS threat across Africa, and to synchronize those efforts with existing initiatives on the ground. The United States also continues to lead international efforts against AQ and its affiliates, reminding our partners that the group remains capable and dangerous. Last year, the State Department brought together 60 countries to discuss threats posed by AQ and endorse guiding principles to combat AQ and its affiliates.

Building Foreign Partners' Capacity

Second, the State Department is using our foreign assistance funding to build foreign partners' capacity to address terrorist threats. We use our counterterrorism-related foreign assistance to bolster our partner nations' capabilities to secure their borders, investigate and disrupt terrorist plots, track terrorist financing, bring terrorists to justice, prevent and counter violent extremism, and rehabilitate and reintegrate former terrorists.

In Kenya, for example, we supported the establishment of the first ever international Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) with the FBI that brought together law enforcement, national security, and prosecutorial personnel under a single entity to conduct intelligence-driven,

proactive terrorism investigations. This effort has established an active and trusted operational mechanism for bilateral information-sharing and investigations, improved interoperability both within Kenyan security services and with the FBI, and directly enabled joint counterterrorism activities that bolster U.S. national security.

Additionally, the State Department continues to explore new opportunities for counterterrorism cooperation with partner nations, including, but not limited to, strengthening law enforcement and security sector assistance partnerships and bolstering regional border security capabilities. Sustaining and expanding bilateral and regional counterterrorism capabilities is critical to confront terrorist groups that threaten the security of the United States and our allies.

Countering Terrorist Financing

Third, the State Department is using our counterterrorism-related designation authorities to counter the terrorist threats around the world. On November 22, the State Department designated Sanallah Ghafari, Sultan Aziz Azam, and Maulawi Rajab as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs) under Executive Order (E.O.) 13224 for their roles as leaders of ISIS Khorasan (ISIS-K). That same day, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated Ismatullah Khalozai pursuant to E.O. 13224 for providing financial support to ISIS-K. As a result of these actions, all property and interests in property of these individuals subject to U.S. jurisdiction are blocked, and U.S. persons are generally prohibited from engaging in any transactions with them or to their benefit.

Similarly, the State Department continues to help advance international sanctions against terrorist groups. In 2020, for example, the United States led the UN Security Council's 1267 Sanctions Committee's efforts to designate ISIS affiliates in West Africa, the Greater Sahara, Libya, Yemen, and Indonesia, as well as the designations of Amir Muhammad Sa'id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla, the new ISIS leader, and Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan leader Noor Wali Mehsud. This UN designation obligates all member states to implement a travel ban, arms embargo, and asset freeze on these ISIS affiliates. Additionally, anyone who finances, facilitates, supplies, and sells arms to, recruits for, or otherwise supports these ISIS affiliates is now eligible for designation under the 1267 sanctions regime. We will continue to assess how we can use these tools to restrict terrorist organizations and leaders.

Preventing Terrorist Travel

Lastly, we play a leading role in preventing terrorist travel, including the potential movement of FTFs in Afghanistan and the broader region. The State Department actively encourages partner governments to nominate terrorist actors, as appropriate, into their own national watchlists and international law enforcement platforms, including that of INTERPOL. We also continue to negotiate and implement bilateral terrorism screening arrangements with select foreign partners, which allows us to exchange watchlist identities with those partners. These efforts augment both U.S. and foreign partners' border screening systems. Similarly, the State Department is taking steps to bolster the biometric and border security capacities of key international partners. These various initiatives position our partner nations to better identify and disrupt terrorist travel around the world.

Conclusion

Amid this diverse and dynamic threat landscape, the path forward to countering terrorism around the world must be one marked by continued diplomacy, dialogue, and diligence. Despite the complexities and challenges of countering terrorism around the world, we must remain vigilant and proactive in protecting the United States and our allies and promoting U.S. national security interests. The State Department remains committed to working with the interagency and partner nations to address the evolving threats of terrorism. With that, I thank the Subcommittee for their time, and I look forward to your questions and our discussion this morning.