

EXAMINING THE WORLDWIDE
THREAT OF AL QAEDA, ISIS, AND
OTHER FOREIGN TERRORIST
ORGANIZATIONS

HEARING

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SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL SECURITY
OF THE
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REFORM

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EXAMINING THE WORLDWIDE THREAT OF AL QAEDA, ISIS, AND OTHER FOREIGN TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS

Tuesday, December 7, 2021

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL SECURITY
COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM
Washington, D.C.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 9:30 a.m., 2154 Rayburn House Office Building, and via Zoom. Hon. Stephen F. Lynch (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Present: Representatives Lynch, Maloney, Welch, DeSaulnier, Wasserman Schultz, Grothman, and Comer.

Also present: Representatives Trahan and Franklin (waived on).

Mr. LYNCH. The committee will come to order.

Without objection, the chair is authorized to declare a recess of the committee at any time. I now recognize myself for an opening statement.

Good morning, everyone, and thank you for attending today's hearing. Today's Subcommittee on National Security will reexamine and reassess the varied and evolving terrorist threats facing our Nation and our democratic allies, with the goal of better preparing for and effectively responding to those threats.

While the current challenges posed by the global COVID-19 pandemic has claimed the attention and resources of our government, we cannot afford to ignore the active and emerging threats that continue to develop, and in some cases have shifted to ungoverned regions of the globe and have evolved in ways that may become more difficult to defeat.

As terrorist threats to the United States continue to evolve, so too must our counterterrorism approach. Terrorist organizations around the world have started to exploit local conflicts and insurgencies to advance their own violent and twisted ideological objectives. Denying safe haven to these organizations and delegitimizing their ideology requires a whole-of-government approach that lessens our reliance on massive, long-term military presence and instead looks to over-the-horizon partnerships and quick-strike capabilities.

Recent history has demonstrated that the value of robust intelligence sharing, diplomatic engagement, and civilian and humanitarian assistance to address root causes of conflict. Experience has also shown that broad democratic goals are best accomplished in

coordination with our allies, by, with, and through local partners in the lead, whenever possible.

We do owe a solemn debt of gratitude to the hundreds of thousands of men and women who have fought to defend our country against terrorism over the past 30 years. Notwithstanding that service and patriotism, which has depleted the ranks of al Qaeda and ISIS leadership, the long-term success of our effort remains a challenge. In some ways, the terrorist threats we face today are more complex and diffuse than ever before, and once again we are in search of a strategy and a policy that will succeed against these new threats going forward.

I look forward to the hearing—excuse me. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about their assessment of the terrorist threats facing the United States. I also look forward to hearing more about how the Biden administration is working to protect Americans from these threats by building and strengthening our counterterrorism partnership and leveraging all available tools of national power, including military force, when necessary.

Finally, while I believe the decision to end the massive 20-year military presence in Afghanistan was the correct one, the withdrawal does create additional counterterrorism challenges, and I look forward to hearing more about how the Biden administration will continue to contain those threats.

In an effort to gain a more thorough insight of these issues, by agreement, we have also arranged for a classified question-and-answer session following this hearing to provide answers to members' questions which may require disclosure of sensitive and classified information and materials.

And with that I will now yield to the ranking member, the gentleman from Wisconsin, Mr. Grothman, for his opening remarks.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Thank you. First of all, I would like to thank you for allowing, to a degree—I know this was not the day we were expecting it, but to allow some of us to attend the hearing in person, and it is appreciated and it has not gone unnoticed.

Good morning. I want to thank our witnesses for being here today. We are here to discuss the worldwide threat of terrorism. Interestingly, we originally invited this hearing weeks ago with a different theme. Back then, the hearing was going to cover the continued threat posed by terrorist organizations following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. I wonder why that changed.

I wish this hearing was focused on Afghanistan. The world watched as the Biden administration botched the withdrawal, leading to the deaths of 13 servicemembers in an explosion outside the Kabul airport.

President Biden promised we would not see another Saigon. He was wrong. He promised he would get all Americans and our allies out of harm's way, but he abandoned them. He promised that al Qaeda was gone, but common sense will tell us that is not true. He promised his over-the-horizon capabilities were just as good as traditional means of counterterror, then launched a drone strike that killed 10 civilians, including children.

Any one of these failures warrants a hearing, but we have not had them. I wonder why.

Since withdrawal, life in Afghanistan has not improved. For example, the Taliban's new government contains U.S.-recognized terrorists. The Taliban threw a military parade with American equipment. The Taliban have brutally beat women and children for protesting for their rights. And the Taliban are actively hunting our allies for execution. But this committee remains silent while it has held hearings on bills not under the committee's jurisdiction, paychecks for soccer players, and the Green New Deal pipeline.

I hope we can learn today how the Biden administration plans to ensure the safety of Afghanistan, including our former troops who are former allies, and the women and girls, what our current over-the-horizon capabilities are and how the Biden administration plans to stop Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorism.

The last time Taliban controlled Afghanistan the result was the worst attack on the homeland in six decades. I sincerely hope we are well positioned to stop that from happening again.

I would like to thank our witnesses again for being here today, and I yield back.

Mr. LYNCH. I thank the gentleman, and I do appreciate his comments about the scope of this hearing. Certainly Afghanistan is in bounds for our discussion in this hearing. As I am sure you share, our priority is the safety of American citizens, both at home and overseas, and the scope of this hearing is broader because we want to make sure that the discussion is germane to other countries, such as Somalia, Mali, Syria, and other theaters where we are also seeing terrorist activity.

So that is the reason we expanded it, but certainly Afghanistan is well within bounds to talk about what is happening there and what is happening with the over-the-horizon strategy.

So I would like to now introduce our witnesses. Today we are joined by Ms. Milancy D. Harris, who is the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Combating Terrorism at the Department of Defense. Ms. Harris was sworn into her position in February 2021. She has extensive experience working on U.S. counterterrorism policy, including through prior service as Chief of Staff of the Director of Intelligence at the National Counterterrorism Center and as the Director for Counterterrorism on the National Security Council.

We are also joined by Mr. Christopher A. Landberg, Acting Principal Deputy Coordinator for the Bureau of Counterterrorism at the Department of State. Mr. Landberg is a career member of State Department Senior Foreign Service and has previously served in several roles at the Department, including as Director of the International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Program at Embassy Bogota and Director of the Counterterrorism Bureau's Office of South and Central Asia and Near East Affairs. I want to thank you both for attending, and especially attending in person. We appreciate that courtesy. I look forward to your testimony.

Pursuant to rules of the committee, would you please both stand and raise your right hands so we can swear you in.

Do you swear or affirm that the testimony you are about to give is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Ms. HARRIS. I do.

Mr. LANDBERG. I do.

Mr. LYNCH. Let the record show that the witnesses have each answered in the affirmative. And without objection, your written statements will be made part of the record.

With that, Ms. Harris—please be seated, both of you. Thank you. With that, Ms. Harris, you are now recognized for a five-minute summation of your testimony.

STATEMENT OF MILANCY D. HARRIS, DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE, SPECIAL OPERATIONS AND COMBATING TERRORISM, DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

Ms. HARRIS. Good morning Chairman Lynch, Ranking Member Grothman, and esteemed members of the subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today, particularly in person, about the Department of Defense's approach to counterterrorism. I am grateful to appear with my Department of State colleague and look forward to today's discussion.

While we have significantly degraded the terrorist threat with the last 20 years of sustained pressure, we still face a potent challenge. The terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland from externally directed attacks is at its lowest since 9/11, but we still face a number of terrorist groups committed to targeting U.S. interests and personnel abroad. These groups seek to take advantage of instability and ungoverned spaces and have a new and evolving set of tools readily available.

Today's terrorist groups are proficient with new technologies, agile in the information environment, creative in circumventing traditional financial systems, and remain ideologically influential enough to motivate generations of new people to join them or conduct independent attacks on their behalf.

But let me be clear. The United States has met this challenge at every evolution. Our capability to counter terrorist threats has grown exponentially since 9/11. While it is critical to preserve the option for unilateral U.S. counterterrorism operations where necessary, we often see that the most effective counterterrorism approach is a mix of kinetic and non-kinetic capabilities and working with our partners and allies.

For the Department, this includes collaborating with allies and partners on partnered operations, using our education and capacity-building programs to help develop increased counterterrorism capability in critical regions and ensuring our security cooperation efforts integrate with other complementary U.S. Government efforts.

As we process the lessons from our time in Afghanistan and set the conditions for a new counterterrorism mission, we will seek to leverage intelligence, diplomacy, and military capabilities to ensure Afghanistan never again becomes a safe haven for terrorist organizations. Any approach will not be static. We will continue to iterate and adjust based on the terrorist threat and what will keep America safe. We will rely on the whole-of-government approach as we seek to deepen relationships in the region, understand the evolving state of Afghanistan's government, and maintain our commitment to the Afghan people.

Our withdrawal from Afghanistan does not diminish the Department's vigilance in our counterterrorism mission, and our full intention remains on protecting our homeland, citizens, and interests from the continued threat terrorism poses, not only from Afghanistan but around the world. We will never waiver in that mission.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished members of the committee. I look forward to your questions today.

Mr. LYNCH. Thank you. And, Mr. Landberg, you are now recognized for five minutes for a summation of your testimony. Welcome.

STATEMENT OF CHRISTOPHER A. LANDBERG, ACTING PRINCIPAL DEPUTY COORDINATOR, BUREAU OF COUNTERTERRORISM, DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Mr. LANDBERG. Good morning. Chairman Lynch, Ranking Member Grothman, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to appear before you today with my Department of Defense colleague to discuss the State Department's and broader U.S. government's efforts to counter the evolving terrorist threats around the world. I would ask that my full written statement be entered into the record.

The United States is confronting a terrorist threat landscape that is dynamic, complex, and fast moving. Foreign terrorist groups remain a persistent and pervasive threat, despite the significant progress we have made in degrading their ability to directly threaten the United States.

Globally, ISIS and al Qaeda remain resilient and determined. Despite significant losses in leadership and territorial control, both groups are leveraging their branches and networks across the Middle East, Asia, and Africa to advance their agendas.

Countering these terrorist threats remains at the forefront of the Biden-Harris administration priorities. The United States' global counterterrorism engagement is a whole-of-government effort, as you said, Mr. Chairman, with the Department of Defense, the intelligence community, and civilian assistance and law enforcement agencies all playing important roles. Today I wish to focus on the State Department's efforts to protect the United States, our citizens, our allies, and our interests from terrorists.

The State Department is taking concrete and specific actions to counter these complex and evolving terrorist threats worldwide. We play a critical role in the United States 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 nations' 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.

The State Department is leading the U.S. government's diplomatic engagements with key partners to ensure broad international counterterrorism support and assistance. State engages with foreign partners and leverages multilateral organizations such as the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, to bolster information-sharing and coordinate and intensify international support.

State, in coordination with interagency and international partners, is using foreign assistance to build partner capacity to enable them to address terrorist threats. We are strengthening these partner nations' capabilities to secure their borders, investigate and disrupt terrorist plots, track terrorist financing, prosecute and incarcerate terrorist offenders, and prevent and counter violent extremism, and also rehabilitate and reintegrate former terrorists.

State is using counterterrorism designations to counter terrorism threats and disrupt terrorism financing. For example, on November 22, we designed three ISIS Khorasan leaders as specially designated global terrorists.

State is also working with our interagency and international partners to prevent terrorist travel. We actively encourage partner governments to nominate terrorist actors, as appropriate, into their own national watch lists and international law enforcement platforms such as Interpol. We also continue to negotiate and implement bilateral terrorism screening arrangements with select foreign partners, which position them to better identify and disrupt terrorist travel around the world.

Amid this diverse and dynamic threat landscape, the path forward to countering terrorism required continued diplomacy, dialog, and diligence. We must remain vigilant and proactive in protecting the United States, our citizens and our allies, and in promoting U.S. national security interests.

The State Department remains committed to working with interagency partner nations and with Congress to address the evolving threats of terrorism. We very much welcome the interest of Congress on this issue, and I look forward to your questions in the discussion. Thank you.

Mr. LYNCH. Thank you.

Before we move to questions I have a couple of quick housekeeping matters. As I understand, several members from outside of the committee wish to participate today. First, without objection, the gentlewoman from Massachusetts, my friend and colleague, Representative Lori Trahan, is recognized for the purpose of participating in the questioning of witnesses. And, without objection, the gentleman from Florida, Representative Franklin, is also recognized for the purpose of participating in questioning the witnesses. Thank you.

I will now recognize myself for five minutes for questions.

In September, Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines stated that while intelligence community will continue to monitor the terrorist threats in Afghanistan, that country is not currently at, quote, "the top of the list for terrorist threats against the U.S. homeland." Instead, Director Haines said the intelligence community sees the greatest threats emerging from places like Yemen and Somalia, where al Qaeda-affiliated groups continue to operate, and from Syria and Iraq, where ISIS maintains the ability to carry out attacks, despite the defeat of its so-called caliphate in 2019.

Ms. Harris, President Biden has stated that the United States will continue to counter terrorist threats in Afghanistan from an over-the-horizon basis. That term has been used multiple times to describe the new profile of our response. To the extent that you can describe it, can you please help explain for our subcommittee mem-

bers what that means. What does that mean and how is it working? How does it work and how is it working with that effort? Thank you.

Ms. HARRIS. Thank you for the question, Mr. Chairman. When we think about over-the-horizon it is not a static concept. It is an iterative approach, tailored to the individual terrorist threat that we are looking at. It is a way to bring the Department and the whole-of-government's full capabilities to bear against a terrorist problem and scale it based on the terrorist threat that we see.

As we seek to set conditions in Afghanistan, for example, we are seeking to deepen our relationships in the region, work with our allies and partners who have a shared interest in preventing Afghanistan from becoming a terrorist safe haven and continue to understand how ISIS-K and al Qaeda are taking advantage of the new situation. As such, we will continue to iterate on how best to counter that threat, but we maintain the full suite of the Department's capabilities to bring to bear as we learn more.

Mr. LYNCH. We have had the chance to, on this committee, look at some of the problem areas. I have led multiple codels to Yemen, Somalia, and the one thing that strikes me in Africa, and Mali as well, but the one thing that strikes me is the sheer size of the continent of Africa and the difficulty that that presents. How does over-the-horizon work on the continent of Africa, places like Mali and the Sahel, and the Horn of Africa, given the fact that we are talking about huge spaces there and most of the areas are ungoverned so the infrastructure is very thin, and it would be difficult to maintain an over-the-horizon presence, I believe, in a timely fashion to address terrorist threats in those locations. Could you talk about the strategy there?

Ms. HARRIS. Absolutely. I think Africa provides a good example of a tailored approach. So it does not necessarily mean we do not have, you know, U.S. forces stationed in Africa, to be operating over the horizon. It means that we can use the full suite of capabilities that are available in Africa, based on the terrorist threat we see.

Some of it is a by-within-through effort. We work with allies and partners, when you think about our activities in the Sahel, and what we are trying to pursue against JNIM and ISIS in West Africa. In Somalia, you have seen we have had both forces in Somalia and stationed nearby, but an approach that focuses on episodic engagement, building partner capacity, working with Somali partners to build increased counterterrorism capacity.

Both, I think, involve elements that could be described as over-the-horizon but are tailored to the nature of the terrorist threat.

Mr. LYNCH. Thank you. Mr. Landberg, does the State Department have a role in this?

Mr. LANDBERG. Absolutely, sir. Thank you for the question. As my DoD colleague was saying, we look at this especially in places like the Sahel and in East Africa as a whole-of-government approach. In counterterrorism, that includes State Department, U.S. law enforcement, and DoD, and other interagency allies. That is part of the equation. But the Administration actually is looking at it as an approach that includes development assistance and governance and working with other countries.

So one of the things I wanted to highlight is that we work very closely with our allies, through a number of international organizations. The D-ISIS Coalition is something that we have been working on intensively, and in a meeting just a few days ago they created, in the D-ISIS Coalition, the Africa Focus Group, which is now going to help the 84 members of the D-ISIS Coalition focus efforts, leverage all our capabilities on addressing terrorist threats in Africa. So this is like a whole-of-government but also really an international community approach.

Mr. LYNCH. Thank you. Have we resourced this enough? I mean, this is a new and additional responsibility, I think, for State Department. Have we provided the resources necessary to undertake this change?

Mr. LANDBERG. Thank you. I can speak for only the Counterterrorism Bureau. We have robust resources that we are working to implement effectively. That is our mission. We have the capability to do more and so do our partners. We work to leverage DHS, DOJ, FBI to help build law enforcement capabilities wherever we are working.

We have more capabilities and we could do more, but right now we are mostly focused on effective implementation of the funding we have.

Mr. LYNCH. OK. Thank you. My time has expired. I now recognize the ranking member, the gentleman from Wisconsin, Mr. Grothman, for five minutes for questions.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Thanks. We will ask Mr. Landberg the questions. In February 2020, the Trump administration signed the DOHA Agreement with the Taliban, and this agreement required that the Taliban sever all ties with al Qaeda before the U.S. withdrew. Did the Taliban, to the best of your knowledge, meet all the requirements of the 2020 agreement before the Biden administration withdrew?

Mr. LANDBERG. Thank you, sir. We have been very clear—we are very mission-focused right now, and we have been very clear with the Taliban what we expect of them in terms of counterterrorism. They are aware that they need to—if they want to build any legitimacy with the United States and the international community, cut ties with al Qaeda and also ensure that Afghanistan never again becomes a source of terrorist threats to the United States or any of our allies. And they are absolutely focused on degrading ISIS-K, and also there have been many discussions on our concerns about al Qaeda and the persistent presence in parts of Afghanistan.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Since you did not answer yes I take it that means there are still some ties there, or what is the deal?

Mr. LANDBERG. The Taliban have, including in a meeting just a few days ago, have assured the United States and also international partners that they will never again allow Afghanistan to become a source of terrorist threat to the United States or any other country.

Mr. GROTHMAN. You are still kind of weaseling around the question. Do they have ties with al Qaeda?

Mr. LANDBERG. Our—we are going to have a classified session later on today I would be happy to talk in a little bit more detail

about terrorist activities and threats emanating from Afghanistan. I will say that right now we have been very clear in our messaging with the Taliban, on numerous occasions.

Mr. GROTHMAN. OK. Now we have a leadership vacuum in Afghanistan, and we have kind of that empty airport there. Will Russia, China, or Iran attempt to make geo-strategic gains through Afghanistan now that we are not there, including at the airport?

Mr. LANDBERG. Sir, so I am happy to take back the question regarding the future of the airport, which is outside my purview in the Counterterrorism Bureau. What I can say is that, as my DoD colleague said, we are working in the region to bolster our partners' capabilities. We are not the only power in that region. We know that Russia and China and others have interest in that region. Where we can work collaboratively with them, we will, and where our interests diverge we will follow U.S. priorities and interests.

And I absolutely know that there have been a number of meetings with the Russians and the Chinese that the United States has been a part of, and there is a lot of concern among all the parties in the region about discussing specifically terrorist threats and instability emanating from Afghanistan.

Mr. GROTHMAN. That is interesting. So you mean that Russia, China, and the U.S. all sit together with the Afghans?

Mr. LANDBERG. We had one meeting that I am aware of with Russia and China. There is definitely a press statement on that. And we have had interaction with both countries where we highlight—and also there has been, actually, interaction in the United Nations as well. So there are a number of fora where we interact with both and where we highlight our major concerns about Afghanistan, what we expect of the Taliban, and also what we expect of the countries in the region to do.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Do you believe terror networks will begin to reform in Afghanistan?

Mr. LANDBERG. I am sorry. I didn't—

Mr. GROTHMAN. Do you think terror networks will re-form in Afghanistan?

Mr. LANDBERG. So we are very concerned about terrorist threats in Afghanistan, and I think there have been a number of public comments on ISIS-K threats, in particular, but also potentially over time al Qaeda threats emanating from Afghanistan. We are monitoring it closely, and we are putting in place not just the unilateral, over-the-horizon capability to degrade that threat but also working to bolster the capabilities in the region.

Mr. GROTHMAN. OK. Were counterterrorism officials involved in the vetting of Afghan refugees?

Mr. LANDBERG. The vetting of Afghan refugees is handled by law enforcement and security professionals.

Mr. GROTHMAN. OK. So you don't know.

Mr. LANDBERG. The Counterterrorism Bureau is aware of all that and involved in a lot of the negotiation of international agreements, but we are not involved in the actual vetting. No, that is DHS and some other agencies.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Were any suspected terrorists or individuals with ties to terrorism, that you know, evacuated from Afghanistan?

I think I am going to followup and give you another question here.

When the people come here from Afghanistan, one of the problems we have at the southern border is people are showing up without IDs. Do we know who these people are for sure? Do they just make up a name, or what is the deal there, before we let them in the country?

Mr. LANDBERG. So this is what I can assure you, that we have robust vetting and screening of every single individual that would come into the United States, and that includes biographic and biometric information. So we have a lot of information about individuals that does not rely on documentary evidence, for example.

Any Afghan that came out of Afghanistan was thoroughly vetted before coming to the United States. If there are issues, certainly DHS has the authorities to prevent those individuals from entering into the United States.

Mr. GROTHMAN. Well, I suppose I should say that is good. I don't know. OK. Thank you.

Mr. LYNCH. The gentleman yields back. The chair now recognizes the gentlelady from Massachusetts, Mrs. Trahan, for five minutes for her questions. Welcome.

Mrs. TRAHAN. Well thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for holding this important hearing. It is so important that we get our chance to ask our questions.

Mr. Landberg, in September 2014, just months after the Islamic State announced the formation of the Islamic caliphate in Syria and Iraq, the United States created a new global coalition with its international allies and partners to conduct counterterrorism operations against ISIS. And over the next five years, the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS worked by, with, and through local military partners to eliminate the Islamic State's territorial holds.

The coalition also utilized non-military measures to reduce the Islamic State's access to funds, undermine its ability to spread its messages online, and stabilize areas that had been liberated from ISIS' grasp.

While the fight against ISIS continues, the coalition's efforts succeeded in eliminating the physical ISIS caliphate in 2019. So, Mr. Landberg, can you please describe how the coalition connected military pressure with diplomatic and other non-military efforts to successfully degrade ISIS' hold in Iraq and Syria?

Mr. LANDBERG. Thank you. I think you could characterize the D-ISIS Coalition as the most successful international counterterrorism organization in history. As you said, it combined the capabilities of many different partners, not just the United States, including all of our most capable partners, really. And it also took a whole-of-government approach, so it was not just, you know, bringing to bear military use of force but also all of the civilian capabilities that many of our governments are very capable of. So the complete destruction of the caliphate was a huge success.

We continue to be concerned about ISIS in the core. One of the things we have seen and been able to pivot the coalition to address, especially over the last year—and I will say actually there was a meeting of political directors on the 2nd of December, and there is a meeting in Bucharest today, and in both meetings they are dis-

cussing how this coalition, which is now 84 members, because Burkina Faso just joined, is now going to leverage our combined capabilities in places where ISIS affiliates are operating, like in Sub-Saharan Africa, but also bringing to bear our capabilities, and not just kinetic capabilities but civilian-led capabilities to address the threat of ISIS Khorasan coming out of Afghanistan.

Mrs. TRAHAN. That is great that the coalition is growing, because the global coalition rightfully focused its efforts on degrading ISIS' capabilities in Iraq and Syria. The ISIS threat is obviously not contained to those two countries, and that became painfully and devastatingly clear on August 26, when militants associated with ISIS-K carried out an attack in Kabul that killed 13 U.S. servicemembers and at least 170 Afghan citizens. One of those servicemembers, Sergeant Johanny Rosario Pichardo, was from my district. She was a proud daughter of Lawrence, Massachusetts, and her community will forever remember her and the 12 other servicemembers killed as heroes.

Mr. Landberg, on November 17, you testified to the House Foreign Affairs Committee that immediately after this attack the State Department asked members of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS to, quote, "consider how it might leverage its experience and expertise to counter ISIS-K." You further stated that the coalition has, quote, "responded and identified potential efforts against the ISIS-K threat." Why does the State Department believe the global coalition's counter-ISIS efforts can be expanded to Afghanistan, and can you elaborate on the potential lines of effort the global coalition members identified to counter ISIS-K?

Mr. LANDBERG. Thank you, Congresswoman. So in the announcements that came out of the political directors' meeting a few days ago, they highlighted how we can leverage each other's experience and capabilities in the area, especially of counter-messaging related to ISIS in Afghanistan, also foreign fighter flows, which is of deep concern to many people, related to ISIS-K operating in Central and South Asia, as well as countering ISIS financing.

So these are some of the areas where working groups within the coalition have already started to consider how we can collectively manage any ISIS Khorasan threat emanating from Afghanistan.

Mrs. TRAHAN. Great. Well, my time is almost up. I will say that the creation of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS heralded a new way to conduct counterterrorism, one that relied not only on our military power but also on diplomatic and civilian lines of effort to degrade terrorist capabilities and assist vulnerable populations directly affected by the Islamic State's rule. And if we are to effectively counter the threat of ISIS-K we will need to do so in coordination with our allies and partners, using all of the military and civilian tools of national power at our disposal.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, again, for letting me waive on, and I yield back.

Mr. LYNCH. The gentlelady yields back, and we are grateful for her participation, and we share in her loss for her local constituent who gave her life so that others would be able to exit Afghanistan.

The chair now recognizes the full committee ranking member, Mr. Comer, the gentleman from Kentucky, for five minutes for his questions.

Mr. COMER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. On July 8, 2021, President Biden said a Taliban takeover was not inevitable. At that point that was not true. President Biden was warned of a Taliban takeover well before July 8. He knew a Taliban takeover was likely but said otherwise.

Ms. Harris and Mr. Landberg, first of all, do you all trust the Taliban? Yes? No?

Mr. LANDBERG. This a verify-before-trust situation. We have been very clear of what we expect from the Taliban. The ball is in their court. They have the ability to demonstrate to the world their commitment to what we have been asking for.

Mr. COMER. OK. Ms. Harris?

Ms. HARRIS. I would agree with my Department of State colleague. I think at this point all we can do is be clear in our expectations, in our commitment to not let a terrorist threat grow.

Mr. COMER. All right. Yes or no. Mr. Landberg, is there an al Qaeda presence in Afghanistan today?

Mr. LANDBERG. I think talking about the specific presence in Afghanistan would probably be better left for the classified session.

Mr. COMER. I assume yes. Mr. Landberg, do the Taliban and al Qaeda have a mutually beneficial relationship?

Mr. LANDBERG. Sir, going back, there has been a relationship, and I think that is well known.

Mr. COMER. So are al Qaeda operatives within the Taliban?

Mr. LANDBERG. Again, sir, I think any discussion on—any level of detail about specific terrorist group activities in Afghanistan probably should be deferred.

Mr. COMER. Does the Taliban actively shield al Qaeda?

Mr. LANDBERG. I think what is clear from conversations so far with the Taliban is that they are aware of our clear message that they cannot allow al Qaeda to use Afghanistan as a safe haven, and I think they are wary of allowing al Qaeda to do that. I think it is a situation in flux, and we can talk in more detail later.

Mr. COMER. Mr. Landberg, can you confirm that after the withdrawal of U.S. troops the Taliban were going door to door and quietly executing U.S. sympathizers and other allies? Was that true or false, that story?

Mr. LANDBERG. I do not think I am in a position to respond to that. The Counterterrorism Bureau was not tracking that. But I would refer you to maybe other parts, or I could take that question back and the other parts of the government would be able to respond.

Mr. COMER. OK. Ms. Harris or Mr. Landberg, let me ask you this question. To conduct counterterror operations or collect intelligence, is the U.S. currently operating with the Taliban in any shape or form? Ms. Harris?

Ms. HARRIS. We are engaged in an active diplomatic conversation with the Taliban, where we have made clear that we are not going to let any terrorist threats evolve in Afghanistan, and our expectations for what they will allow within that territory. But I would defer to my State colleague for specifics on that discussion.

Mr. COMER. Mr. Landberg?

Mr. LANDBERG. So the interaction so far has been dialog. It has been mainly with our special representative for Afghanistan. In

every single interaction, and in the recent press release from the meeting just at the end of November we are clear on what we expect from them, and the counterterrorism expectations are top of the list, always.

Mr. COMER. OK. Ms. Harris, do you need permission from the Taliban for the United States to strike terrorists in Afghanistan?

Ms. HARRIS. I am happy to elaborate further on our use of force policies in the closed session. However, what I can say to you is we have been clear that we will do whatever is necessary to keep Americans safe right now, as we engage in this dialog, and that our commitment to the counterterrorism mission in Afghanistan and preventing it from becoming a safe haven have remained unchanged.

Mr. COMER. So if we have pretty significant confidence in intelligence that a terrorist is at a certain spot in Afghanistan, the United States can go ahead and pursue those terrorists without getting permission from the Taliban.

Ms. HARRIS. I will refer you to comments that have been made by others from the Department. We will do whatever is necessary. We have said as much to the Taliban, and left no mystery there that if we have actionable intelligence and understand a credible threat to U.S. personnel, U.S. interests, we will seek to counter that threat.

Mr. COMER. Mr. Chairman, my time has expired.

Mr. LYNCH. The gentleman yields back. The chair now recognizes the gentlelady from Florida, Ms. Wasserman Schultz, for five minutes for her questions. Welcome. Thank you.

Ms. WASSERMAN SCHULTZ. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the opportunity to ask questions, and I appreciate you sponsoring this important hearing.

Since 2001, we have faced a terrorist threat that is rapidly evolving. Instead of plotting, organizing, and carrying out attacks directly, terrorist organizations are increasingly relying on individuals who are inspired by their ideology to take up arms on behalf of their cause.

In September, FBI Director Chris Wray testified that these home-grown violent extremists, along with domestic violent extremists, are, quote, "the most significant terrorism danger to our country."

Sadly, the violence perpetrated by home-grown violent extremists has already had a devastating impact on the United States. For example, in December 2015, two individuals inspired by ISIS carried out a mass shooting in San Bernardino, California, that killed 14 people and wounded 22 others, and the following year a terrorist who pledged allegiance to ISIS killed more than 50 people at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida.

Mr. Landberg, do groups like ISIS and al Qaeda have a deliberate strategy to inspire political sympathizers to conduct attacks on their behalf?

Mr. LANDBERG. Thank you, Congresswoman. I think all terrorist groups over the last 20 years, and this is intensifying, have sought to use modern technology to inspire and radicalize, so absolutely, ISIS and al Qaeda attempt to do that in many parts of the world. That includes the United States. And I think where we have seen

a lot of activity and a lot of movement by ISIS and al Qaeda affiliates to radicalize and take advantage of ungoverned spaces and local grievances has been in places like Sub-Saharan Africa.

Ms. WASSERMAN SCHULTZ. Thank you. And why is terrorist plotting by home-grown violent extremists so challenging to disrupt? And I am asking this on a question, because certainly we have to continue to really focus on terrorism anywhere we might be attacked, but we have got a very serious problem right here in our country, inspired by foreign terrorists, and I would like a sense from you of the challenges that we face in disrupting those plots.

Mr. LANDBERG. Well, it is challenging. We are certainly not the only country struggling with it. I think maybe a way to respond is to talk about some of the things we are doing to counter terrorist use of the Internet. We are working very closely with social media companies to get them to enforce their terms of service. We are working internationally to build capabilities of many of our partners, to be able to also counter terrorist messaging and use of the Internet. We are working through the United Nations with different partners. And we do our own counter-messaging.

So there are a number of lines of effort that we do to counter terrorist use of the Internet to radicalize and inspire, but absolutely, it is a challenging problem.

Ms. WASSERMAN SCHULTZ. To address the threat of home-grown violent extremism, we really need to be proactive about de-legitimizing terrorist ideology and countering their messaging.

Mr. Landberg, can you talk about the counter-messaging efforts being undertaken by the State Department, including the Global Engagement Center, and how that work is being coordinated with the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS?

Mr. LANDBERG. Thank you. Yes. Counter-messaging is a key part of what we do. The way the United States approaches it is really to counter negative messaging with positive messaging and to build long-term resistance to terrorism messaging instead of, for example, trying to control content.

So the GEC is certainly the lead for the Department in that effort, but since the CT Bureau and the CT coordinator is dual-hatted as a special envoy for counter-ISIS, CT Bureau and GEC work very closely, specifically with our coalition partners, to do counter-messaging and have expanded those efforts.

Ms. WASSERMAN SCHULTZ. Thank you. Madam Chair—Mr. Chairman, excuse me—if we are to effectively counter the terrorist threats that exist today we have to work fully with our international allies and partners to ensure foreign terrorist groups cannot spread their hateful messages and inspire others to commit violence, not just in foreign countries but against the United States as well, from within.

Thank you. I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. LYNCH. The gentlelady yields back, and we are thankful for her participation. Thank you very much.

The chair now recognizes the gentleman from Florida, Mr. Franklin, for five minutes for his questions.

Mr. FRANKLIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate you holding this really important hearing today, and thank you to our witnesses for being here. It is unfortunate the circumstances and the

logistics did not work out to have more people participate, but it does not, in any way, diminish the significance of the topic here.

Mr. Landberg, the Haqqani Network is currently designed a foreign terrorist organization. Is that a fair assessment in your mind? Do they deserve to be on that list?

Mr. LANDBERG. They are designed as a foreign terrorist organization and have been for a while, and they deserve to be on that list.

Mr. FRANKLIN. And you see them still continuing the activities that they have been known for conducting?

Mr. LANDBERG. So we see—we would be happy to talk in more detail, with more granularity, during the follow-on session, but the Haqqani group has been traditionally more inwardly focused in Afghanistan. But absolutely, they continue to be designated as an FTO, and we are continuing to monitor them closely.

Mr. FRANKLIN. OK. And the head of the Haqqani Network is currently the Taliban's Interior Minister. Is that correct?

Mr. LANDBERG. Yes.

Mr. FRANKLIN. All right. In light of that, and also there are plenty of reports out there that people who we have worked with, who are sympathizers to the U.S. cause, have been rounded up. There are reports of execution. I have not verified that, but I would certainly think in your line of work that would be important to know and that you would be investigating that.

But in light of that, should the Taliban have been removed from the list of designated terrorist organizations?

Mr. LANDBERG. So we are under no—we have regular reviews of FTO designations. We are not at that five-year mark yet. We are under no pressure obligation to reconsider that.

I think it is a wait-and-see situation in Afghanistan, and a lot of it is up to the Taliban and to see how they behave going forward, and whether they are going to fulfill their many commitments made to the United States and international community, specifically related to counterterrorism.

I will note that, as you mentioned, some of the concerns about abuses. In the recent meeting with the Taliban, or the dialog that our special representative had, it notes this in the subsequent press release, it was highlighted our deep concerns about some of these reports. So we are monitoring it and tracking it very closely.

Mr. FRANKLIN. So as of today the Taliban has not been removed from that list?

Mr. LANDBERG. The Taliban is designated as a specially designated global terrorist, not as an FTO. Also for immigration purposes, they are actually considered an FTO. Those are very strong tools. Again, it is really the Taliban have it in their hands to fulfill their commitments, and it is not just counterterrorism. I think we have been very clear about freedom of movement, return of Mark Frerichs, inclusive government, protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms.

So there are a number of expectations we have, and that is going to determine how we deal with the Taliban going forward.

Mr. FRANKLIN. Well, considering that their Interior Minister is still on the FBI's Most Wanted List, I would hope—I have strong concern about that and would hope that the Department would not take them off.

Ms. Harris, moving on there, there were estimates, when we had testimony before the Armed Services Committee, of al Qaeda re-emerging in Afghanistan within six months. It is now three months later. I understand you probably cannot get into a lot of detail in this environment, but without the specifics is that bearing true? Are we seeing activity there?

Ms. HARRIS. So as you rightly said I cannot get into a ton of specifics here. What I can say is that we are well positioned to monitor terrorist organizations. We continue to try to improve our intelligence picture, day over day, to make sure that we are monitoring those threats. What I can tell you is that we are focused on making sure we have the capability to counter any threats we see crop up.

Mr. FRANKLIN. We unilaterally blinded ourselves in Afghanistan. General McKenzie, when he spoke before Armed Services, had testified that, you know, with 2,500 troops he could have held Bagram, we could have still maintained that in-country ISR capability, but given the caps, the political caps of 700 people to defend the embassy, the airport, and Bagram, it just simply could not be done. But he wanted to make it clear that it could have been done had they been given the authority to do that.

In light of our inability to see what is happening in the country there now, do you think that was a mistake?

Ms. HARRIS. I think we have to consider what we need to cultivate to understand what is going on in Afghanistan. I think it is more complex than just maintaining ISR coverage. I think we need the full suite of intelligence capabilities. We need to work with our allies and partners. We need to ensure that we have a robust kind of intelligence picture across all of the intelligence ins to make sure we really understand what is going on.

I think, day over day, we are trying to iterate and improve on that picture. We have a sense of what is going on in the country. I think it is better than it was three months ago, and I think if I come back and see you in three months we will have a more nuanced understanding then. Some of that is from the diplomatic channel. Some of that is from continuing to kind of understand where we are with our intelligence picture and seek to improve in different ways.

Mr. FRANKLIN. Well, from the outside observation it appears to be diplomacy of wishful thinking and also the same on the military side. We have unilaterally handicapped ourselves.

Mr. Chairman, I am past my time but I yield back. Thank you.

Mr. LYNCH. I thank the gentleman for yielding. The chair now recognizes the gentleman from Vermont, a long-time member of this committee and one of our hardest workers in this area, the chair recognizes the gentleman from Vermont, Mr. Welch, for five minutes for his questions.

Mr. WELCH. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Landberg, in September, Christy Abizaid, the Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, told the Homeland Security Committee that the current worldwide terror threat is, quote, "less acute to the homeland but which continues to become more ideological diffuse and geographically diverse."

My question is, even if foreign terrorist threats to the U.S. homeland have diminished, and you can comment on whether you agree

with the progress she states, they still pose a threat to our national security interests. Is that right? And can you explain why?

Mr. LANDBERG. Yes, sir. Thank you. I think, absolutely, although it is evolving we have also evolved our approach. The Biden-Harris administration, as my DoD colleague said, is actually taking a whole-of-government approach to dealing with these threats.

While we have had great success over the last 20 years in securing the homeland and creating a network of alliances that include information sharing and vetting and screening to prevent terrorist travel, and we have really increased the security of our country, threats continue to multiply, as we have noted in many places, specifically Sub-Saharan Africa, but that is not the only location.

So to deal with this we are evolving from what has maybe been a little bit military-heavy counterterrorism approach over the last 20 years to a more balanced approach, as we also start to deal with a broader range of threats that goes way beyond counterterrorism, to cyber threats, to strategic nation state competition. By dealing with this as a whole-of-government our focus is going to be more on building the partner capabilities and also leveraging these international relationships that I have been talking about, like, for example, the D-ISIS Coalition.

Mr. WELCH. Ms. Harris, do you have anything you would like to add to that?

Ms. HARRIS. I think with regards to Director Abizaid's remarks, I do think we see the threat from foreign terrorist organizations abroad as at its lowest point since 9/11. But what we see is a committed group of terrorist organizations that want to radicalize and inspire, and that is a different kind of threat for us. It presents a different challenge when you think about trying to counter that. I think, as my Department of State colleague said, the tools that you use there are things like, you know, engaging with social media companies on use of the Internet and working to try to counter messaging from, you know, the Global Engagement Center, and other U.S. Government entities.

Mr. WELCH. Thank you. Mr. Landberg, are you able to comment in a public setting to what extent al Qaeda and ISIS, the core, maintain operational control over any other prospective branches and affiliates?

Mr. LANDBERG. I think it may be better to discuss details in the follow-on session, but there is connectivity, and I think it is publicly acknowledged between the ISIS affiliates networks and leadership.

Mr. WELCH. Let me ask you this. You know, the African home-grown extremist groups have objectives and disproportionately target regional governments and civilians. Is that your view as to the focus of their main attention, not that they don't affiliate with other terrorist groups that may have global aspirations? Can you comment on that, Mr. Landberg?

Mr. LANDBERG. So to make sure I understand, so there are ISIS and al Qaeda affiliates spreading throughout the world, and interacting with different elements in many of the spaces that they are moving into. And as we mentioned before, they take advantage of local grievances, ungoverned spaces, and often in these spaces there is already criminal and terrorist activity that these more or-

ganized affiliates are able to then take and focus to further, really, the ISIS and al Qaeda objectives in those regions.

Mr. WELCH. OK. Thank you very much. Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

Mr. LYNCH. The gentleman yields back. The chair now recognizes the full committee chair, the gentlelady from New York, Ms. Maloney, for five minutes. Welcome.

Ms. MALONEY. Thank you. Thank you very much, Chairman Lynch, for holding this important hearing, and thank you for calling on me.

The United States is a force for good in the world because we take extraordinary steps to avoid civilian casualties when conducting military operations. We are not perfect. The loss of innocent life is a tragic reality of war, but when we harm innocent civilians we must take responsibility for our errors and investigate what happened so that the same mistakes do not happen again.

Ms. Harris, I would like to ask you, do you agree that protecting innocent life while conducting military operations is a moral and strategic imperative?

Ms. HARRIS. Thank you for the question, and, ma'am, I agree wholeheartedly. I think at the center of our very ethos are accountability and transparency. We abhor the loss of innocent life. We take all possible measures to prevent them. And when we have incidents it is our duty to learn from those and seek to be better.

Ms. MALONEY. Thank you, and I agree. That is why I am so concerned by recent examples under both Democratic and Republican administrations. There are examples of the Defense Department concealing or downplaying civilian casualties.

The New York Times recently reported that under the Trump administration, when ISIS was making its last stand in Syria, in March 2019, U.S. forces conducted an airstrike that may have resulted in the deaths of dozens of innocent civilians. Instead of acknowledging the mistake, the military reportedly concealed the strike, downplayed the death toll, classified key reports, and even destroyed the site of the attack.

And more recently, the August 29 airstrike in Kabul, which was intended to prevent another ISIS terrorist attack at the Kabul airport, tragically killed 10 civilians, including 7 children. Yet DoD only admitted this after a New York Times report challenged the military's claim that the targeted vehicle was carrying explosives to be used in a terrorist attack.

Ms. Harris, I appreciate that Secretary Austin has directed General Michael Garrett to conduct an independent review of the March 2019 strike in Syria. I also understand that the Air Force inspector general has reviewed the August 29 strike in Kabul and found that the personnel involved, quote, "truly believed at the time that they were targeting an imminent threat to U.S. forces."

But nonetheless, as the United States of America we need to do a better job of protecting civilians and acknowledging our mistakes so that they may be corrected. So I would like to ask, what steps is DoD taking, following these two incidents, to protect innocent life and ensure that civilian casualties are appropriately documented and reported, and will you commit to providing our com-

mittee with a briefing following the conclusion of General Garrett's review of the March 2019 strike in Syria? Ms. Harris.

Ms. HARRIS. Ma'am, we are committed to working with Congress once the investigations are complete.

With regards to how we are processing the lessons learned, what I can assure you is that at all levels we are focused on understanding the investigation, understanding the mistakes that were made, and instituting processes by which we take accountability internal to the Department but also ways in which we will incorporate those lessons moving forward.

Ms. MALONEY. Well, thank you. Even when we make tragic mistakes we have a moral obligation to acknowledge our shortcomings. I look forward to working with you and the Biden administration to uphold America's reputation as a force for good in the world.

And I yield back. My time has expired.

Mr. LYNCH. The gentlelady yields back. We will now conclude with myself and the ranking member on closing remarks.

I do want to go back to allegations made by one of our members that President Biden knew, or could confirm that the collapse of the Afghan government and the subsequent takeover by the Taliban was inevitable. I just want to push back on that statement with the facts.

No. 1, we have had multiple hearings at this subcommittee, beginning with the special envoy for Afghan negotiations with the Taliban, under the Trump administration. Zalmay Khalizad came here, sat at that table, representing the Trump administration in those negotiations, and reaffirmed that a Taliban takeover was not inevitable. He came back afterwards when he became the representative for the Biden administration, and again on the ground, in the meetings, able to make an on-the-ground assessment himself. And at that second hearing that he appeared before this subcommittee, now representing the Biden administration, said that a Taliban takeover was not inevitable.

We had the Afghan Study Group come before us, led by an esteemed Republican Senator, Senator Kelly Ayotte, also with General Joe Dunford, former head of the Joint Chiefs, and Nancy Lindberg from the Afghan Study Group. They did not say that the takeover by the Taliban was inevitable.

We had President Ashraf Ghani's Defense Minister come here to the Capitol. I personally, with a group, met with him, and he assured us, the Defense Minister of Afghanistan said a Taliban takeover is not inevitable.

We sat down with Ashraf Ghani, the President of Afghanistan, with Speaker Pelosi and Republican leadership. He assured us that the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan was not inevitable.

I met with a larger group, Republican and Democrat, at the Munich Security Conference, with the Trump negotiating team, the team that was negotiating with the Taliban over the U.S. withdrawal, and they assured us that a Taliban takeover was not inevitable.

So all of that evidence, from people who were directly involved with the negotiations and had personal experience and information from their own involvement in that process assured us, multiple

times, over and over again, that a Taliban takeover was not inevitable, as a result of the Trump agreement to withdraw.

So those are the facts, and I am compelled to defend the President's actions here and his position were trying to follow a fact-based response to the situation in Afghanistan.

With that I yield to my colleague for any closing remarks he might have.

Mr. GROTHMAN. I would like to thank our witnesses for coming over here today. Obviously, we are still very concerned about how things wrapped up in Afghanistan, very concerned about the airport there in northern Afghanistan and what is going to become of it, and what is going to become of all the equipment that we left behind.

I understand, or I think I understand why a lot of my questions remain unanswered, because you are saying we have to wait for a more secure location to answer them. But I, and I think many Americans, most Americans, should be very concerned, not only with what is going on in Afghanistan, what is going on with people who are associated with our efforts in Afghanistan, and reports that at least I hear of people dying, you know, being kidnapped and dying. I am very concerned about the huge number of people coming here in this country and whether they have been appropriately vetted, and very concerned about our lack of presence in all the countries surrounding Afghanistan, which is a recipe for trouble down the road.

I am also very interested, and maybe you guys can be prepared for this if we have a closed-door meeting, in what our relationship is with Pakistan and the degree to which they will help prevent terror from emanating from that part of the world.

But I will thank the chairman for having this subcommittee meeting, and hopefully we will have more in the near future.

Mr. LYNCH. I thank the gentleman.

In closing, I want to thank our witnesses for their remarks today. I want to commend my colleagues for participating in this important conversation. I also want to remind everyone that immediately following this hearing we will have a classified briefing for members in HVC-301.

With that, and without objection, all members will have five legislative days within which to submit additional written questions for the witnesses to the chair, which will be forwarded to the witnesses for their response. And consequently I would ask our witnesses to please respond as promptly as you are able.

This hearing is now adjourned. Thank you.

