

Press Releases: Acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism Justin Siberell on the Release of Country Reports on Terrorism 2016

Special Briefing
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MS NAUERT: Thank you so much. Good morning, everyone, and thanks so much for calling in for this. It's an on-the-record briefing with our Acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism Justin Siberell. The call will be embargoed until the conclusion of the call, but we're glad that you're here to join us right now.

As you know, today the State Department is releasing its Annual Country Reports on Terrorism. It describes the global counterterrorism landscape in 2016 and fulfills a congressional mandate. The report also allows us to highlight the significant terrorist trends and also take stock of how effective U.S. and international efforts have been in countering these threats. It also helps us to make more informed judgments and plans about our policies, our priorities, and where to place our resources.

So with that, I'll turn it over to Acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism Justin Siberell. Justin, go right ahead.

MR SIBERELL: Well, thank you very much, Heather, and thanks to everyone for calling in this morning. Hopefully by now you've had a chance to go through portions of the report. I'll offer a few summary remarks about its main findings, and then I'm prepared to take questions.

Terrorist attacks and fatalities from terrorism declined globally in 2016 from levels seen in 2015, and at the end of my remarks I will summarize a few of the topline statistics that are included as an appendix to the yearly report.

ISIS remained the most capable terrorist organization globally in 2016, directing and inspiring terror cells, networks, and individuals around the

world, even as it faced increased military pressure in Iraq and Syria and suffered considerable territorial losses throughout the year – through the year. Excuse me.

We also faced a resilient al-Qaida and an Iranian regime that remained the leading state sponsor of terrorism.

The international community strengthened cooperation in a number of areas, including by expanding information-sharing related to terrorist identities to prevent terrorist travel, strengthening border and aviation security, and putting increased resources into efforts to counter radicalization to violence and terrorist recruitment.

As you all are aware, ISIS lost considerable territory it controlled in Iraq and Syria through 2016, and the report provides detailed assessment of that progress. Iraqi Security Forces supported by the coalition delivered a series of defeats on ISIS through 2016, beginning with the liberation of Ramadi in February, the recapture of Fallujah in June, and the seizure of the Qayyarah Air Base in northern Iraq in July, and finally the launch of the broad offensive in Nineveh in October that led to Iraqi Security Force penetration deep into eastern Mosul by the end of the year.

As you know, the Iraqi Security Forces completed the liberation of eastern Mosul in January, and earlier this month the Iraqi Government announced the liberation of all of Mosul from ISIS after one of the most complex urban combat operations since World War II. This is a critical milestone in the global fight against ISIS and underscores the success of the international effort led by the Iraqi Security Forces.

In Syria, the border between Syria and Turkey was fully cleared of ISIS presence in 2016. Syrian Democratic Forces supported by coalition efforts liberated a number of cities and towns used by ISIS as transit and facilitation hubs for foreign terrorist fighters and ISIS external plotting efforts, including Manbij and Jarabulus. These operations set the stage for the operation to isolate and liberate Raqqa, which, as you know, is currently underway.

ISIS has relied heavily upon foreign terrorist fighters but was unable to sustain a sufficient inward flow of new foreign terrorist fighter recruits in 2016 to compensate for battlefield losses. While the sustained military campaign and ISIS' loss of territory and resources are key factors in that, governments around the world enacted a number of reforms and improved border security measures to make it much more difficult for foreign terrorist fighters to transit to and from Iraq and Syria.

As a result of its loss of territory and foreign terrorist fighters, attacks outside ISIS territorial strongholds in Iraq and Syria were an increasingly important part of ISIS' 2016 terrorism campaign. ISIS dispatched operatives from Iraq and Syria to conduct attacks but also worked aggressively to inspire and encourage attacks by its followers to demonstrate continued strength and relevance. ISIS directed its followers to attack in their home countries rather than attempt to travel to the conflict zone, which itself is

an acknowledgement of the more difficult environment faced by aspiring foreign terrorist fighters to access the conflict area.

Another feature of the terrorism landscape in 2016 – and this is a continuation of what we saw in 2014 and 2015 – is the exploitation by terrorist groups of ungoverned territory and conflict zones to establish safe havens from which to expand their reach. In 2016 ISIS established a presence in the Libyan coastal city of Sirte, from which it was expelled as a result of a concerted ground campaign by Libyan forces with U.S. air support.

Somalia, Yemen, northeastern Nigeria, portions of the Sinai Peninsula, the Afghanistan-Pakistan border regions, and portions of the Philippines, among other places, are examples of such safe-haven environments.

Turning to al-Qaida, al-Qaida and its regional affiliates exploited the absence of credible and effective state institutions in a number of states and regions to remain a significant worldwide threat despite sustained pressure by the United States and its partners. Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula remained a significant threat to Yemen, the Gulf region, and the United States despite a number of key leadership losses as the ongoing conflict in Yemen hindered U.S. and partnered efforts to counter the group.

Al-Nusrah continued to – al-Nusrah Front, al-Qaida's affiliate in Syria, continued to exploit ongoing armed conflict to maintain a territorial safe haven in parts of northwestern Syria. And al-Shabaab continued to conduct asymmetric attacks throughout Somalia and parts of Kenya despite weakened leadership and increasing defections. The establishment of a new government in Somalia and its efforts along with the international community to extend governance while maintaining security force pressure on al-Shabaab is an important recent development in Somalia.

Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and its affiliates in Mali have shifted their operational emphasis from holding territory to perpetrating attacks against government and civilian targets, including hotels in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Cote d'Ivoire, as well as UN peacekeeping forces in northern Mali.

And then finally, al-Qaida in the Indian subcontinent continue to operate in South Asia, which the AQ al-Qaida Core has historically exploited for safe haven, and claim several attacks targeting religious minorities, police, secular bloggers, and publishers in Bangladesh.

In Afghanistan, al-Qaida suffered continued losses, including through the death of senior leader Faruq al-Qahtani, who was killed in a U.S. operation in Kunar, Afghanistan in October 2016.

Attacks by homegrown lone offenders continued in 2016, particularly in public spaces and other soft targets. Examples of this include the attack in Nice in July, in which a Tunisian national drove a truck into a Bastille Day festivities parade, killing 86; in Germany, an ISIS-claimed truck attack killed 12 in a crowded Christmas market in Berlin in December; and of course, in the United States, Omar Mateen killed 49 in an attack on the Pulse nightclub in Orlando.

While ISIS continued to receive most of the headlines and remains a top focus for U.S. and international CT efforts, Iran remained the foremost state sponsor of terrorism globally. As explained in the report, Iran continues to provide support to Hizballah, Palestinian terrorist groups in Gaza, and various groups in Syria, Iraq, and throughout the Middle East. Iran employed the Quds Force of its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to implement foreign policy goals, provide cover for intelligence operations, and create instability in the Middle East. The Quds Force is Iran's primary mechanism for cultivating and supporting terrorists outside of Iran. Iran has acknowledged the involvement of the Quds Force in conflicts in Iraq and Syria.

In 2016, Iran remained the primary source of funding for Hizballah and coordinated closely with Hizballah in its efforts to create instability in the Middle East. Hizballah is a designated foreign terrorist organization, and Iran has trained thousands of its fighters at camps in Iran. Hizballah has contributed significant numbers of its fighters to support the Assad regime in Syria and carried out several attacks against Israeli Defense Forces in 2016 along the Lebanese border with Israel.

Iran continued to support Iraqi militant groups, including designated foreign terrorist organization Kata'ib Hizballah, and it has provided weapons, funding, and training to Bahraini militant groups that have conducted attacks on Bahraini security forces. In January 2016, Bahraini security officials dismantled a terrorist cell linked to the Quds Force that was planning to carry out a series of bombings throughout the country.

Iran remained unwilling to bring to justice senior al-Qaida members it continued to detain and has refused to publicly identify the members in its custody. Since at least 2009, Iran has allowed al-Qaida facilitators to operate a core facilitation pipeline through the country, enabling al-Qaida to move funds and fighters to South Asia and Syria.

Now that's a rundown of the major trends and findings as contained in the report. You'll find a lot more details in the individual country sections and then the accompanying statistical annex. And just a few words about the statistical annex which is appended to the report, and it is prepared by the University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, known as START, by the acronym START.

As I noted at the top of the briefing, the total number of terrorist attacks in 2016 decreased by 9 percent, and total deaths due to terrorist attacks decreased by 13 percent compared to 2015. This was largely due to fewer attacks and deaths from terrorist attacks in Afghanistan, Syria, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Yemen. At the same time, there was an increase in terrorist attacks and total deaths in several countries, including Iraq, Somalia, and Turkey. ISIS was responsible for more attacks and deaths than any other perpetrator group in 2016. In 2015, it was the Taliban that was responsible for more attacks and deaths.

And although terrorist attacks took place in 104 countries in 2016, they were heavily concentrated geographically, as they have been for the past several

years. Fifty-five percent of all attacks took place in Iraq, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines, and 75 percent of all deaths due to terrorist attacks took place in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Nigeria, and Pakistan.

All of these statistics and more are in the annex, as I said, that is appended to the report. And while I cite these statistics which are compiled by the University of Maryland and they are not a U.S. Government product, I must emphasize that numbers alone do not provide the full context, something that we – and a point we make consistently when the numbers fall from – fall and rise from year to year in the report.

So with that, I'd be happy to take your questions.

MS NAUERT: Okay, Justin. Thank you so much. And all of you, just as a reminder, the call is embargoed until the end of the call, and it is on the record. So we'll start with our first question then, please.

OPERATOR: Ladies and gentlemen, if you wish to ask a question, please press * followed by the 1. You'll hear a tone indicating that you've been placed in queue, and you may remove yourself from queue at any time by pressing the # key. Once again, for questions please press *1 at this time.

Our first question today comes from the line of Barbara Usher with the BBC. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yeah, just two sort of general questions. You mentioned that the combat against AQAP had been hindered by the conflict in Yemen in 2016. Can you talk a little bit about what that involved and whether that – and to what degree that continues or whether that's been changing? And also, in terms of Iran, I know there's been some talk about designating the IGRC as a terrorist group. Is that at all in the works or being discussed seriously?

MR SIBERELL: Well, thank you for the questions. With regard to Yemen, what I'm referring to is the fact that the Yemeni Government does not have the ability to extend its own capabilities into areas that are – where AQAP is located. So whereas prior to the conflict we had a partner, albeit a generally speaking weak government but a government that did have police forces, intelligence services with whom we and other partners could work to help to dismantle AQAP networks in the country, while the conflict has continued, that presence is really no longer available to us or the Yemeni Government itself. So that's what I mean by the fact that as the conflict continues it's a more difficult environment in which to address the threat posed by AQAP. And that, of course, leads then to the importance of a negotiated political settlement in that conflict which our government is pursuing.

On the – on Iran, I believe the IRGC is designated under certain Treasury authorities, and that's where that remains currently.

QUESTION: Can I just have a follow-up there? Has AQAP strengthened in the last year because of the – of the conflict?

MR SIBERELL: I don't think we have an assessment that they have strengthened necessarily, because they have had control of certain territory and then lost territory. So it's a very fluid situation in Yemen. It's one that we watch very closely because of AQAP's historical targeting of the United States in particular. So it's something that our military and security agencies watch very, very closely. But it is a fluid environment, and one in which there is a safe haven that's been established and one where we continue to work with partners on the ground to address.

MS NAUERT: Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from the line of Yeganeh Torbati with Reuters. And as a reminder, for additional questions please press *1. Thank you.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks so much. Just a couple of quick questions. So the language on Sudan in the state sponsors of terrorism section is quite different this year. I know that probably reflects the policy that kind of started late last year. But it seems quite supportive of the Government of Sudan's efforts, but Sudan remains on the state sponsor of terrorism list. I'm just wondering what else would you need to see from – from Sudan in order for them to be taken off that list?

And then just very quickly, the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard said today that the U.S. should move its bases 1,000 kilometers away from Iran if it wants to pursue penalties like sanctions against Tehran. And that seems to be a pretty thinly veiled threat, and I was just wondering how seriously does the United States take that sort of threat from the IRGC? Thank you.

MR SIBERELL: With regard to Sudan, the criteria for removal from the SST are identified in the statute, and those include that a government needs to certify that it hasn't provided support to international terrorism in the preceding six-month period; it provides assurances it will not support terrorist acts in the in the future. And so there are – there are particular criteria that are necessary for a country to meet in rescinding the state sponsor – being removed from the state sponsor of terrorism list – from that designation. That said, I will say that the – there is some cooperation with the Government of Sudan, and we've been pursuing that as part of the broader discussion with the Sudanese Government. And the Sudanese Government has recognized itself that there is an ISIS threat in particular in the region and has been cooperative in some areas with regard to that threat. But the criteria for removal is stated in the statute.

I don't have any comments on the second question with regard to the threat.

MS NAUERT: Okay, thank you. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Our next question is from the line of Nick Wadhams with Bloomberg News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks very much. Just two quick questions. One, can you tell us what, in your view, chiefly accounts for the decline in attacks and

deaths, the number down by 9 percent and the total death toll down by 13 percent? Is there a particular issue or a particular reason for that?

And then second, I'm curious – with the travel ban and the six countries mentioned and the concerns about potential terrorist threats to the United States, does the report say anything about the threat posed by those six countries toward the United States? Thank you very much.

MR SIBERELL: I tried to at the beginning caveat the – on the one hand, the statistics – and you can find those, as I said, in the annex, and there are significantly more detail than I provided with regard to the number of attacks, where they took place, and the change in year by year in the annex. The overall number decreased, and that's the result of significant decreases in certain places. So as an example, there were fewer attacks and deaths in Nigeria and Pakistan. Now, there have been years when attacks have increased significantly in those places, so there is a kind of year-by-year fluctuation. The broad trend, however, is a slight decrease from 2015, and that – in 2015 had a slight decrease from 2014. 2014, of course, was a year of significant increase – really a spike, frankly – in global terrorist attacks due largely to the – coinciding with the rise of ISIS, vicious attacks in Nigeria conducted by Boko Haram, et cetera. But I think you can look within the statistics as provided in the annex to get more details on the specifics behind the decrease.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Thank you. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Next question comes from the line of Joyce Karam with the *Al-Hayat*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yes, hi. Thanks, Justin. I wanted to ask you, on the Hizballah threat, that seems more highlighted in this report than previous ones. Can you elaborate on it? How serious do you view this threat, and do you think Hizballah has gained actually more capabilities and became a bigger threat from its fighting in Syria?

And another question, I'll just throw it in: You mentioned al-Qaida operating at large. Do you see al-Qaida threat today as outliving ISIS based on the facts we see in this report? Thank you.

MR SIBERELL: Okay, thank you for the questions. I mean, Hizballah is a extremely sophisticated terrorist group with a network that extends globally, both operational capability and then also support network that resides in a number of regions around the world, and we are working very closely with partners around the world to disrupt that network. They maintain a significant military capability that is being brought to bear to support the Assad regime's fight against its own people in Syria. Many Hizballah soldiers have died in that conflict and been wounded. I think there is sort of a mixed picture as to whether that has strengthened or weakened the group. Certainly they've gone full-in on supporting the Assad regime and its war against the Syrian people, and at the same time has continued to strengthen its capabilities in southern Lebanon. So there's a real concern with regard to Hizballah and the role it plays in the region, in particular its

collaboration with Iran to engage in destabilizing activities in the Middle East.

With regard to al-Qaida outliving ISIS, al-Qaida has demonstrated that it is a resilient organization. It is quite adaptable, but that said, we see a lot of consensus among partners and governments to continue to put pressure on the group, and we will continue to do so.

MS NAUERT: Thank you.

OPERATOR: Next we'll go to the line of Felicia Schwartz with *The Wall Street Journal*. Please, go ahead. Ms. Schwartz, your line is open.

QUESTION: Hi, sorry. Can you hear me now? Hello?

OPERATOR: We can hear you.

QUESTION: Okay. I just wanted to follow up on Nick's question about the six countries mentioned in the travel ban and if the report this year shows any changes from 2015 that would merit the ban, if there's any information about that.

MR SIBERELL: No, the report itself is, without reference to – I mean, we make an assessment of terrorism trends globally. We do include in the report a section on safe havens, and that – some of those safe havens are located in those same countries. I think the concern is that in places where there are conflicts and the presence of terrorist organizations, we want to, as a government, ensure that those governments have the ability to and have in place capabilities to ensure identity management, and that in the issuance of documents, travel documents, and in applying for entry and immigration benefits to the United States, we can be confident with their ability to maintain integrity of those processes.

So there is in, of course, in general, a concern on these issues globally, but in those places where there is an active terrorist threat, there's a safe haven environment in which terrorist groups are active, certainly we pay very close attention to those parts – those locations.

MS NAUERT: Next question, please.

OPERATOR: We'll go to the line of Conor Finnegan, representing ABC News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hey, thanks for holding this call. The report mentions that there are terrorist groups based in the Middle East who find support in Latin America. It's something that the Homeland Security Secretary has spoken about as well. Can you talk about how serious the threat is posed by the flow of foreign terrorist fighters not only into the Western Hemisphere, but then throughout the Western Hemisphere possibly into the United States, over our borders here?

MR SIBERELL: Well, the foreign terrorist fighter phenomenon with regard to the ISIS conflict is a global one, and there are individuals who have come

from more than 100 countries around the world, and those include the United States and those include other countries in the Western Hemisphere. There – with regard to groups’ presence, I mean, we don’t see an active operational presence of groups in Latin America. We work very closely with all of our Latin American partners and in the Caribbean; security agencies are very – cooperate very closely in this regard, and it’s a matter of close cooperation, I would say, with all of our partners in Latin America.

So we are concerned about radicalization, individuals who have gone to the conflict zone and may be coming back, as we are globally on that particular issue.

MS NAUERT: Okay. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Question comes from the line of Nicole Gouette with CNN. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks for doing the call. My question was asked and answered.

1. **NAUERT:** Okay. Thank you, Nicole. Somebody else?

OPERATOR: We’ll go to the line of Matthew Lee with the Associated Press.

QUESTION: Hi there. I just wanted to follow up on the question about Sudan, because the language seems almost apologetic in saying that they’re still identified as a state sponsor. Are you expecting that there could be possible movement on this before the three-month extension of the suspension of certain sanctions is up? And are you aware that apparently, the Sudanese are trying to work with the Saudis to lobby you guys to get off the list? Thanks.

MR SIBERELL: Well, the – like I said earlier, the ongoing discussions we have with the Government of Sudan do include ensuring that we have effective cooperation in addressing terrorism threats, and there has been some positive response in that regard. But as I also noted, there are specific criteria that need to be met in order for Sudan to be removed, or at least its designation rescinded as a state sponsor of terrorism. And those issues continue to be a feature of the discussions we have with the Sudanese Government.

MS NAUERT: Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Our final question today comes from the line of Lucia Leal. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, good morning. I wanted to ask about Cuba. It was removed from the list of nations that sponsor terrorism in 2015; it is out of the list again – well, it’s still out of the list. I wanted to know if this was a decision that the Secretary himself made, since back in January he said to Congress that he wanted to examine the criteria under which Cuba was removed from the list.

MR SIBERELL: Cuba was removed, and there is no requirement within the report for an individual chapter on every single country around the world. We

produce chapters in the Country Reports based upon material, frankly, to include in the report. So it was assessed that there was not sufficient information there to provide a report this year on Cuba, but it was removed from the state sponsor list previously.

MS NAUERT: All right. Thank you for joining us, Justin. Thank you for your time and your expertise. The embargo has now been lifted. Have a great day now.

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