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MODERATOR:

VANDA FELBAB-BROWN
Senior Fellow and Director, Initiative on Nonstate Armed Actors
The Brookings Institution

FEATURED DISCUSSION:

TRICIA BACON
Associate Professor, Department of Justice, Law and Criminology
American University

BRUCE HOFFMAN
Senior Fellow, Counterterrorism and Homeland Security
Council on Foreign Relations

VERA MIRONOVA
Research Fellow, Davis Center
Harvard University

JONATHAN SCHRODEN
Director, Countering Threats and Challenges Program
Center for Naval Analyses

JOSEPH SIEGLE
Director of Research
Africa Center for Strategic Studies

FELBAB-BROWN: Good afternoon and thank you for joining us today. I am Dr. Vanda Felbab-Brown, senior fellow in Foreign Policy at the Brookings Institution, where I directed the initiative on nonstate armed actors and co-direct the Africa Security Initiative. We are meeting today to discuss the state of terrorism around the world on the anniversary of September 11, 2001, when al-Qaida terrorists conducted a vicious attack against the U.S. homeland, murdering 2996 people. It was one of the most horrific terrorist attacks ever in history and caused great pain to our country. It shall never be forgotten.

For two decades after, countering terrorism with global reach became the center tenet of U.S. foreign and national security policies. Destroying al-Qaida and its cells around the world, and a decade later, another jihadi terrorist group, the Islamic State, that captured large parts of Iraq and Syria, and whose branches and affiliates spread across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, became central goals of U.S. policies. The United States became the primary architect of the global counterterrorism regime and its many facets. From military engagement and assistance around the world to methods to counter financial flows and material support to terrorist groups. What came to be called the global war on terror also had profound implications for U.S. internal policies and life in the United States, as well as in other countries. It gave rise to incurring new vast institutions such as the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. And it profoundly impacted U.S. laws and civil liberties.

Twenty years later, as we are speaking today, U.S. National Security Strategy documents no longer highlight the global war on terrorism. It is now great power competition dealing with the rise of China and the threat it poses to U.S. interests. With Russia's egregious invasion of Ukraine and Russia's anti-Western and anti-democracy policies around the world, they dominate U.S. foreign and national security strategy. The United States is no longer engaged militarily in many parts of the world that defined the post 9/11 era. Most notably, the United States has withdrawn from Afghanistan. It withdrew from Afghanistan because it judged the terrorist threat then to be sufficiently diminished and because it calculated that a further expansion of military presence would not reverse the dynamics in the country. In other countries, Western counterterrorism presence ended because the ruling regime no longer welcomed Western support. Most notably, this has been the case in Mali, when the junta asked French troops to leave and then recently U.N. forces to leave. New counterterrorism actors such as the Russian private military company, the Wagner Group, before-began offering themselves in an alternative vision of counterterrorism across Africa and the Middle East.

In this radically different policy context, where are we today, in fact, with the state of terrorism around the world? To discuss those issues, I am honored today to be joined by a panel of highly distinguished experts. Scholars and policymakers whose ideas profoundly inform policies. They include Dr. Bruce Hoffman, Dr. Jonathan Schroden, Dr. Vera Mironova, Dr. Joseph Siegle, and Dr. Tricia Bacon. I will introduce each of them further before they speak.

And let me start with Dr. Hoffman. I can think hardly of a more knowledgeable person to start our conversation. For several decades, Dr. Bruce Hoffman has been doing seminal work on terrorism and insurgency. He's a professor at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service, where he is-- where he also was the director of Walsh's Center for Jewish Civilization and Security Studies Master of Arts degree program. He is currently, in addition to being professor at Georgetown, also the Shelby Cullom and Kathryn W. Davis senior fellow for counterterrorism and homeland security at the Council on Foreign Relations and the George H. Gilmore senior fellow at the U.S. Military Academy's Combating Terrorism Center. Bruce is the author of many groundbreaking books on terrorism. I don't have the opportunity to list all of them, simply want to mention the award winning "Anonymous Soldiers," and Bruce's forthcoming book, which perhaps might be already out, coauthored with Jacob Ware, "God, Guns and Sedition: Far-Right Terrorism in America."

Bruce, the scope and arc of your work is a perfect encapsulation of how terrorism and counterterrorism have been evolving across several decades, and their focus has shifted, and methods has changed, and threats have changed. Now let me throw to you, what is the threat of terrorism against our homeland like today, 22 years after 9/11? Is jihadi terrorism still a significant issue? Or are far-right terrorism, and I note here that you use the term far-right terrorism not simply extremism in the title of your book —something of distinction that could have significant policy implications — the more important threat? Where are we today?

HOFFMAN: Right. Well, Vanda first, thank you for organizing this, this really brilliant panel that's going to cover all the dimensions of the threat. I needn't say very much about the Salafi-jihadi threat. It's still with us. Just two weeks ago, the FBI in Philadelphia arrested a 17 year-old who had been radicalized by one of al-Qaida's Central Asian affiliates based in Syria, but also that operates out of Afghanistan. And there have been new threats today from al-Qaida, so I don't think those threats have gone. But that underscores, I think, how different and challenging the situation is today. Twenty years ago, arguably, or certainly 22 years ago, you know, we faced basically one enemy in a limited

amount of geographical space. Today, we face a multiplicity of enemies. Not just the al-Qaida movement, but ISIS, but also their franchises and branches, you know, from North Africa to South Asia and from the Caucasus down to Southern Africa. But the biggest change for me is that our threats are no longer only foreign, they're in fact domestic. And certainly, this is preoccupied American intelligence capabilities over the past, certainly really the past five or six years. But of course, the revival of violent far-right extremism at least, really commenced with the election of President Barack Obama, the first African American elected president of the United States.

To assess the threat today, and let me let me emphasize it comes from the far-left as well as the far-right, I mean, I'm counting at least eight significant far left militia groups. Now, that's something that I wouldn't have said a few years ago. I mean, we normally associate militia groups with violent far-right extremists. So, they're on both sides. But firstly, let's go to the numbers. FBI Director Christopher Wray in 2018 said that — sorry 2019 — reported that the FBI was conducting 850 domestic terrorism investigations, which was a record number. Well, that number had doubled by 2020, and it was more than triple last year. So, the FBI's been very active. They categorize domestic extremism into three buckets: REMVEs (racially ethnically motivated violent extremists), AGVEs (anti-government, violent extremists), and both those categories can be on the left as well as the right. As well as the remaining grab bag: incels, militants, ecological terrorists, animal rights activists who commit violence, militant opponents of anti-abortion. But the majority of terrorist incidents is certainly emanating from violent far-right extremists. One problem is we have no domestic terrorism statute.

So, to dig deeper into the granularity of who's behind or who are the main sources of those investigations, we have to rely on non-governmental organizations like the Anti-Defamation League that has been following violent extremism in the United States for over a century. They report that in 2022, there were 12 incidents that resulted in 25 homicides. All of them were committed by violent far-right extremists, and 95% of those were white supremacists. And this is a pattern that the ADL has monitored since 2012. In essence, 75% of all the politically motivated homicides in the United States, which is to say terrorism, well we don't call it that at least legally, were perpetrated by violent far-right extremists. And of that 75%, roughly three quarters were perpetrated by white supremacists, so it's very clear where the threats coming from.

Why is the threat emerged so forcefully today? In essence, these groups embraced an accelerationistic strategy, where they believe the system is so corrupt and so rotten that only armed violence can succeed in creating the chaos and disorder that will ultimately lead to a revolution. And this crystallized very much, I would argue, on January 6th, 2021, which really embodied the acceleration of the strategy. In fact, the gallows and scaffold, hangman's scaffold, that was in front of the capital — which is in fact on the cover of my book which comes out January 2nd, 2024, it's not yet available — was very much part of this accelerationist strategy.

FELBAB-BROWN: Well, thank you very much for those excellent and sobering comments, Bruce. I look forward to coming back to you to speak about the label terrorism. When should we be applying it domestically and what are the implications? But let me now turn to Dr. Jonathan Schroden. I know you spoke, Bruce, about the al-Qaida threat that was just disrupted two weeks ago in the United States and where self-radicalization was an important component. But this of course, all ties to the big debate that we have been following over the past several days and weeks, frankly, about the highly differing assessments between the United States and the U.N. expert panel on what is the state of al-Qaida. And specifically, how it is related to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. Win the United States, went to Afghanistan to destroy the Taliban and remove it from power to take away al-Qaida safe havens.

Twenty-two years later, the Taliban is firmly in power and there is a big debate as to what does this mean for al-Qaida? How much is al-Qaida taking advantage of it? Al-Qaida is not the only terrorist group in that space. And I just cannot think of a better person to guide us through this debate and frankly controversy than Dr. Jonathan Schroden, whose very sober and sharp analysis, has been so fundamental for thinking about Afghanistan and, frankly, other places as well, such as Iraq. Look the job that Schroden is the director of the Countering Threats and Challenges Program at the Center for Naval Analysis. That program supports U.S. government understanding of state and non-state threats and challenges. Dr. Schroden then also directs the Special Operations Program, which focuses on full spectrum research and support for U.S. Special Operations forces. And as part of his work at CNA, Jon deployed and traveled to core, to places of core counterterrorism focus, many times to Afghanistan and Iraq. But he also supported issues such as disaster relief after Hurricane Katrina. He has served as a strategic adviser to the second Marine Expeditionary Force, the multinational force list in Iraq, the U.S. Central Command, and the International Security Assistance Force in

Afghanistan. Among John's recent latest work is directing an assessment of the global information war between Russia and Ukraine. And I also believe that I can give away that Jon is writing a book on Afghanistan that we are all very very keen to read and see. John, where are we today in Afghanistan? What's happening with the terrorism picture there? How much of a threat this is for the homeland? What's the state of al-Qaida and other groups?

SCHRODEN: Yeah. Thank you, Vanda, for that introduction and for inviting me to join. I mean, this is really a phenomenal panel. I'm honored to be amongst the folks speaking today. So, thank you for that. As you said, I mean, the AfPak region remains, I think wave top. Right. It remains an incredibly complicated region when it comes to international terror-- terrorism. You know, there's still 20 foreign terrorist organizations, designated FTOs, operating in the region. I know that some people have become tired of that talking point. It was it was overused by some U.S. military commanders, perhaps, but it nonetheless remains true. There are still 20 designated groups in this area. It is still a very dangerous region when it comes to international terrorism. I obviously can't speak about all 20 of those groups in this amount of time, so I'm going to focus here on four: al-Qaida, the Islamic State Khorasan Province, which is the regional affiliate of ISIS in the region, the Pakistani Taliban or TTP, and the East Turkistan Islamic Movement or ETIM. Those are really the four groups that get the most attention these days. And obviously, in the four minutes that I have remaining in my opening remarks, I'm gonna only touch on wave tops of those four groups, and obviously we can unpack a lot more detail in the Q&A.

So, let me start with al-Qaida. You're your intro Vanda, I think hit the nail on the head. Right. There's a lot of disagreement these days between the United Nations and between the U.S., especially on what is the nature of al-Qaida in Afghanistan. You have these U.N. reports that have said there are some tens, you know, maybe 50 core al-Qaida members in Afghanistan. If you add their families and supporting members, maybe it's several hundred, maybe as many as 2,000 right on the top end of the estimates. And they say things like, you know, the group is operating covertly, establishing training camps, they may be moving senior members there. But overall biding its time in an era of strategic patience while the Taliban are providing them top cover. That's kind of the U.N.'s take. The U.S. take is al-Qaida in Afghanistan is basically done. There's very little activity taking place. There's been no name successor to al-Zawahiri after the U.S. killed him just over a year ago. The presumed successor, Saif al-Adel, is is still under house arrest or some form of monitoring in Iran.

And al-Qaida is not a major threat to the U.S. homeland or really even to countries in the region any time soon.

So that's a pretty pretty far disparity between those two assessments that the U.N. and the U.S. have promulgated over the last three or four months. You know, where does the truth lie? As usual, when it comes to intel assessments, there's probably elements of both of those assessments that are true. But reconciling them, I think, is a really important thing that needs to occur in the months to come. The one point of agreement I will say that that does exist is that the relationship between the between al-Qaida and the Taliban remains strong. There is the Taliban have not disavowed al-Qaida. There is evidence that there are still strong relational links between the two groups. And on that, I think there is broad general consensus that those two groups still remain, you know, in each other's good graces, if you will.

On the Islamic State Khorasan Province, ISKP, here there is consensus that this is the largest terrorist threat emanating from this particular region. It is the most likely source of both regional attacks as well as certainly international attacks or what the U.S. government calls external operations or Ex-Ops. In fact, there are numerous, at least three or four, documented links between ISKP and various foiled attacks that have taken place, mostly in Europe, over the last two years. So, it is the most dangerous threat. Everyone agrees on that. It is also the common enemy of everyone in the region to include the Taliban. I mean, everyone hates ISIS in the region. Even though it is ISIS's top regional affiliate in terms of, you know, whatever metrics you want to point to, generally speaking, ISKP over the last two years has been in the top rankings in terms of ISIS's regional affiliate.

Over the last two years under Taliban rule, what are we seeing out of ISKP? They've expanded their geographic presence. They've generally expanded their media output, both in terms of content, amount of content, as well as the number of different languages they're operating in. They've expanded their attack profiles in a lot of different ways, their recruitment, as well as their international connections. All of those things have expanded since 2021. And interestingly though, we have seen an overall decline in their attack numbers this year. And there is some debate about what that means. There are some analysts who have concluded that it's a deliberate choice on the part of the ISKP. That they're exuding some amount of strategic reorganization, strategic, you know, re-redirecting. For example, they've conducted more attacks in Pakistan and some cross-border attacks into Central Asia. There are others who sort of think that, well, the Taliban have actually gotten quite a bit better in

their own counterterrorism operations against the Islamic State or especially over the last 6 to 8 months, and that that has inflicted some real damage on ISKP. Once again, there's probably you know, the truth is probably somewhere in the middle of those assessments but there is some debate amongst analysts as to exactly what's happening there.

On the Pakistani Taliban, we've seen a real resurgence of TTP, especially in Pakistan's tribal regions over the last year. There's been an increasing number of mergers of of disparate groups under the TTP umbrella, to the point where the estimates of TTP size are now somewhere around 5000 members, which is quite a much larger size than they've had, you know, in any of the recent years in the recent past. And they've been, you know, commensurately increasing attack numbers. They've been getting a lot more press and notoriety in the region, especially in Pakistan, obviously. Although, right, this is mostly a regional issue. I mean, TTP has not historically had much in the way of external operations, capability, or linkages. Although there have been some notable examples, like Faisal Shahzad a decade or so ago, but for the most part TTP remains a regional issue, primarily focused on Pakistan even though it has become the primary bone of contention between the Pakistani government and the Taliban de facto authorities in Afghanistan.

And then ETIM, the East Turkistan Islamic Movement. Again, completely a regional threat, mostly of interest to China, given its orientation primarily towards China, Western China. Some hundreds of fighters, primarily in Northern Afghanistan. China has repeatedly asked the Taliban to take action against this group. There are some indications the Taliban may have tried to constrain them in some ways, perhaps move some of their camps around. But generally speaking, the Taliban have not done anything more than that. They've not taken any real counterterrorism actions against this group. That's just China's chagrin. And so, ETIM remains there, remains more a nuisance to China, more of a threat to China than anyone else. But again, in the top four groups to be concerned about in the region.

FELBAB-BROWN: Thank you very much, Dr. Schroden, for this great opener. As you said, we can just stick in the opening comments the top line conclusions. But much to discuss about TPP, about al-Qaida, that I look forward to exploring with you and with our other colleagues on the panel a little bit later on. I mean, we've heard about the Islamic State in Khorasan, and you discussed its fortune and misfortunes in Khorasan. The one actor that everyone hates.

And I am delighted now to be able to turn to Dr. Vera Mironova, to speak with her about what is the state of the progenitor of ISK, the original Islamic State in the Middle East. Do we find ourselves in a position where everyone in the Middle East also hates the Islamic State? And in fact, what is the strength of the group that was able to achieve an Islamic caliphate? Something al-Qaida dreamed about but never ultimately managed to do. Whereas the Islamic State, through horrendous violence, succeeded for three years to hold. Dr. Mironova is the author of many books and highly knowledgeable on the issue of Islamic State. And her, her knowledge comes from very daring and impressive fieldwork that I am always delighted to highlight and admire. I mention that she is the author of two books, one of them builds specifically, or to a very large extent, the Islamic State from freedom fighters, the jihadist human resources of non-state armed actors, and was deeply involved by her being embedded with the Iraqi Special Operations forces during the Mosul operation in 2016 and 2017 to combat the Islamic State. And for those of you in our audience who don't know, at the time, the battle over Mosul was the bloodiest urban battle since World War II. Vera also has a new book out that, just like Bruce's, captures the shifting spectrum or the expanding spectrum of the threat that non-state armed actors and terrorists specifically pose, including the challenge of right-wing extremism. Vera's new book is "Criminals, Nazis and Islamists: Competition for Power in Former Soviet Union Prisons."

So, we are once again, as we are speaking today on the anniversary of 9/11, we find ourselves in a similar controversy about ISIS in the Middle East, as is the controversy about al-Qaida in Afghanistan. I was last in Iraq in February and March. And the bottom-line analysis I kept hearing regularly from not all actors, but most actors, was that ISIS is much weaker and has a very limited ability to mount anything other than local attacks. They might be fairly frequent, but they are very small, very limited. Often the focus is principally on extortion. But once again, we heard from the U.N. monitoring group of experts a far graver assessment that is not only concerned about the big challenge and risks and threat of ISIS prisoners and their families being held in Kurdish detention camps in Syria, but also about ISIS fighters at large. So, Dr. Mironova, what is your take? What is ISIS in the Middle East like today? What kind of threat it poses? And what are the other terrorist groups in the region that we should be concerned about?

MIRONOVA: Thank you again for inviting me. So talking about ISIS in Middle East, we should not forget about that. No, no, no. It's too early. So, unfortunately, they are still pretty capable. So,

maybe they are a couple of people right now, somewhere in cages trying to survive. But again, you know, if there would be int--- someone interested in running them or helping them, they would pretty much scale very fast. So, I wouldn't be ignoring them right now. Maybe they're still dormant, but if there would be a right timing. I mean, right now, if I was ISIS in Iraq, I wouldn't be bothered also because, you know, there is Russia, there is Iran, there is all those countries. You would just sit quiet and then figure out who, you know, what's going to happen next and when would be the right time to engage. Right now, is just a bad time for them. But I would definitely not ignore them. Like, they exist.

So then talking about prisons and camps, which is also detention camp. Right? It's not a refugee camp. It's a detention camp. So, talking about human male ISIS members, foreigners. So, of course the situation is pretty bad in Iraq. So, in Iraq, do we like it or not, it's actually pretty bad but not terrible because there are not that many prisoners in prisons, in terms of foreign fighters, they are locals. But in terms of foreign fighters, they're not. And some of that has to do with, it's not clear where actually they were taken after Mosul fell. There is opinions and very serious opinions about those ISIS foreign fighters who were taken to Iran instead of being actually imprisoned. And the ones who are actually imprisoned there, they're the ones collected in [inaudible]. But so that we actually don't know how many we do have. But again, at least they are more or less the ones in Iraq. They're counted. They're all locked. And, you know, they are locked. They have cell phones, at least female ISIS foreign members in Iraqi prisons. They have cell phones, which is annoying because they have nothing to do and they spread propaganda and then they basically do recruitment, all that stuff, and help with raising money for ISIS members at large. But again, minor inconvenience, at least they don't kill anyone. Right? So, that's the situation in Iraq.

If we move to Syria, Syrian detention centers like al-Hol and al-Roj. And of course, the prison for males. The state of prison for males is pretty bad and it could go worse. We already saw the rape. So, I expect it to be more and more happening. In terms of female detention centers. Well, the whole situation is terrible. But here we're again choosing between bad and the worse. So, being in this prison camp is pretty bad. Again, they all have cell phones. The stuff that is happening inside, you guys, you just don't want to know. Like, it's just I mean, it's mind blowing. So, the best basically the most normal thing that happens inside of them, they training kids to become next fighters. At least this one we could expect. What is going on in terms of like other things, I just it's not even comprehensible. So, and again, the same thing with cell phones, propaganda, raising money. We had

something some cases, for example, selling fake, we were tracking one seller who was selling fake passports for ISIS members to go to Europe. And we ended up basically with the ISIS female member locked in a [inaudible] camp. So, she was the one doing basically customer service for whatever boyfriend was hiding somewhere. So again, propaganda, fundraising, coordinating males down in the camp. What can we do about it? Well, if we send them home, which would be great, right, and I hope we could send them home and get them prosecuted.

But the problem is that I could right now say majority countries, with exception of, let's say, U.S., Tajikistan, they do not prosecute them. Like I actually saw I think it was Uzbekistan, or Kyrgyzstan, or Palestine, where they welcomed ISIS female members with balloons. Like the government was like, welcome home. So, they don't prosecute them. And this is, this is a really terrible issue because first we are bringing them home while letting them free. They continue doing what they're doing, but they now, they are basically we are helping them multiply the network. We are actually helping them build an international network. So, and keep in mind that they're all connected right now, not only by their links to ISIS, right. Just by being members of ISIS.

Let's take any random, let's say a woman from Dagestan. Her first husband was French, her second husband was Tajik, her third husband was Bosnian. And now she has all those kids who are basically brothers and sisters. And she has basically extended in-laws in all those countries who are also jihadist. So, right now, those networks are not only ISIS geological network, they're all family networks. Which you could imagine how much harder it would be to deal with? They're all physically connected by family now, all those international jihadists. So, we can't just take them back and say, let them out. They don't prosecute them. So first, those women continue doing what they're doing. Again, fundraising, converting more people, and so on. And converting is a really big because they need to get a new husband if their husband is dead. And for that they need to get someone the same radical because not radical husband would not take a woman like that with five kids from Syria. I mean, it's just physically impossible. I mean, it's it's ridiculous. So, for that, they need to basically make men who would take that. And for that they need to radical-- radicalize them. That idea, you know, like it's just better for everyone. But that's basically what happens. And again, they're still involved in all the criminal activities.

But the second part is because we don't prosecute them, we signal all their neighbors, physical neighbors, by welcoming them with balloons that they would be next to ISIS and then we will

be next. ISIS please go. You know, then you're free to go home. We even going to fly home for free. So, it actually raised a lot of issues in, let's say, Central Asia because, you know, Central Asia is poor. So, local folks who didn't go to ISIS but were the same poor and the same miserable, they're like, m we're actually sitting here working and trying to survive. And now they come in, they got all this U.N. programs or whatever reintegration or whatever benefits, whatever welfare, it's just simply not fair. They're being welcomed. And free medical, of course, because they're all wounded, they need to be patched together. So, it's a lot of trouble. And now they see that next ISIS, there will be, they're free to go because they would be they would be welcome back. So, I think that's the biggest problem right now. Is that they're still very radical. And by basically mishandling them, we are we are helping them multiply.

FELBAB-BROWN: Well, very sobering comments. And Vera you mentioned some of the really thorniest dilemmas that the global war on terrorism and its face today present, which is how do we deal with criminal prosecution in cases, where we often don't have the criminal evidence to make prosecution effective and plausible? How do we deal with radicalization that is often exacerbated by the state of conditions, by the conditions, by the state of detention camps? But on the other hand, one of the big sources of problems, in my view, that's the war on terror generated, was vast overcriminalization of populations.

This is something acutely felt in Africa, for example, but also in the Middle East, in places like Iraq, where simply living under the umbrella, under the force umbrella of groups like al-Shabaab, or Boko Haram, Islamic State in West Africa province, or the Islamic State, generated at minimum a perception of being a terrorist, but often an actual terrorist liability simply by being forced to pay taxes or perform conditions for perform work or perform services for the Islamic groups. And if you didn't perform those services, you would be killed. So, the criminalization of simply living under the control of Islamic State and other terrorist groups generated these very difficult, very thorny legacies and often very problematic effects. Something that I look forward to also returning in our conversation.

But, those issues, overcriminalization of populations, highly punitive approaches, and the blowback and backfire, have been acutely felt in Africa, have been acutely felt in the space of Sahel to Nigeria. And it is that part of the world that today generates some of the most intense threats. Some of the most potent and active terrorist activity. We have been discussing how dormant or active al-Qaida and Islamic State are in Afghanistan and Middle East about their capacity to rapidly resurrect

themselves to conduct attacks. Well in the Sahel region, the threat is active. It is not just resurrected. It's at its arguably maximum intensity that we have seen at any time over the past two decades and even longer. Just as we are meeting here today, the al-Qaida linked JNIM in Mali has been conducted massive attacks against cities of Gao and Timbuktu. Both of which could readily fall to the al-Qaida group. Whereas ISGS, another terrorist group in Mali linked to the Islamic State has been on the outskirts of Ménaka, another important city, again, essentially being able to take Ménaka. And this, of course, in the context of Mali, having asked that the junta in Mali have been asked for French, and U.S. troops, and any U.N. troops to leave the country, relying on the Wagner Group to save it from the terrorist threat.

So, we are very fortunate today to have Joseph Siegle to give us the picture of terrorism in the Sahel and his thoughts on policies and policy effectiveness. Dr. Siegle leads the Africa Center for Strategic Studies of its Research and Strategic Communications Division. And prior to joining the Africa Center at the National Defense University, he was the Douglas Dillon fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, as well as a senior research scholar at the University of Maryland Center for International and Security Studies, a senior advisor for Democratic governments, the DIA. Joe served for more than a decade in various field capacities across Africa as well as in Asia and the Balkans. So, Joe. Sahel, arguably the epicenter of terrorist activity today. What is the picture like? What are the most dangerous spreads? What are the most dangerous patterns? What kind of international or global international implications do they have?

SIEGLE: Well, thank you, Vanda. It's an honor to be part of the panel and very much enjoying hearing the perspectives from all my other panelists. So, to give some perspective before jumping into the Sahel. There are five main feeders of violent extremist activity in Africa. I think it is important to keep in mind. So, in addition to the Sahel in Somalia, which Dr. Bacon will talk about, you know those are the two most active. We also have Lake Chad Basin, northern Mozambique, and and North Africa, primarily in the Sinai Peninsula. We're also keeping an eye on the allied defense forces in Eastern DRC and Western Uganda. But as you rightly say, you know, the Sahel has been the region that we've seen the most escalate-- escalation of violent extremism in recent years. In fact, 65% of all fatalities linked to militantismist groups in Africa in the past year have been in the Sahel. And again, to get further perspective, we've seen a doubling in the number of events, violent events, linked to extremist groups that since 2021 in the Sahel. We've seen a tripling in the number of fatalities. So,

this past year we've seen just under 10,000 fatalities in the Sahel. About 15,000 across the continent over this past year. So, absolutely right. It's very active, very real, and expanding.

This time period over the last couple of years coincides with the seizing power of military juntas in primarily Mali and Burkina Faso, where most of the activity is concentrated. This is important because, you know, the justification for the coups is that they're going to address insecurity, when in fact it's amplified. And, you know, the juntas in both Mali and Burkina Faso have been linked to spikes in human rights abuses. We've seen escalations in violence against civilians during this time period. And meanwhile, they've alienated all the other security partners that were engaged in trying to help stabilize the region. This includes neighboring countries under the G5 Sahel. As you mentioned, they're pushing out the U.N. forces, MINUSMA. The EU had been ramping up engagements, and of course, France sent its Barkhane operation. And this has had real effects on security in the region.

You mentioned Mopti and in Gao. In both of those regions, we've seen a 40% increase in the number of fatalities during this last six months as MINUSMA has been starting to draw down operations. So, I've been focusing on Burkina Faso and Mali. They comprise 87% of all the violent activity in the Sahel. And I think it's, you know, most accurate to think of these as insurgencies, you know, violent extremist insurgencies, rather than one off, you know, terrorist type of activities. There are some six to eight militant Islamist groups that are involved in this activity. They have ostensible links to al-Qaida and ISIS. Well, these are largely locally run, locally managed, you know, locally financed and and operationalized groups on the ground. And, you know, they're involved in a whole host of activities, battles, laying out IEDs, violence against civilians.

And, and we've seen shifting motivations. While they were initiated in on ideological grounds, as they've matured, as they found ways of sustaining themselves financially, there's much more of a criminal element to what we observe. Focusing on controlling artisanal, gold mines, extortion, extracting, revenues from other trafficking routes in the region. So, it changes the dynamic of what we're seeing. I think the other key element I would want to leave with is that from a security threat, these groups, you know, with their escalation, they've been increasingly taking more territory today in Burkina Faso. Estimates are that more residence groups control about 50% of the territory. In Mali, it's about 40%. And they're increasingly controlling key arteries that are and getting closer to the capitals in the respective countries.

So, you know, I think it's a very real possibility that not only some of these cities, but the states themselves could collapse. So, you know that you know that that raises sort of what are the regional international implications. And I would highlight a couple. First, is that we're already seeing spillover of these threats in close to West Africa, primarily in Benin and Togo, just in the past year. There has been an eight-fold increase in the number of violent incidents in these neighboring countries. So, now in this past year, there's 250 fatalities in these previously stable areas. I mentioned the potential collapse of Mali and Burkina Faso. You know, these territories are equivalent to really two and a half times the size of Afghanistan. And so, if they were to fall, well, for the most part, the extremist activity has been locally based, it could create a haven for more international jihadist activity to set up shop and be a threat not just to the broader region but internationally. We've already seen, you know, some 3 million people forcibly displaced from Burkina Faso and Mali. These are creating strains on the region and increasingly on Europe and so that problem could only escalate.

And then finally, you mentioned the role of Wagner and Russia, and I think this adds another layer of complication. You know, it's often presented that they are another security force. I think that's a misnomer. What Wagner is there to do is help prop up those military juntas, because that provides it with some geostrategic leverage in the region. You know, Russia's not investing in these countries. It's not trying to stabilize these countries. What it's trying to do is to displace the West, and in the process enhance its own geostrategic posture. You know, it's it's been very active disinformation, trying to prop up the juntas and and promote anti-Western, anti-U.N., anti-democracy narratives. Wagner has been involved in a lot of the human rights abuses. There's some 328 different human rights incidents that Wagner is linked to, along with the military's that they're supporting. And so, I think the bottom line is that Wagner is a destabilizing force. It's not a stabilizing force. With the recognition that they're the ones who are going to pick up the pieces. So, let me leave it at that and happy to pick up more as we get to the question and answers. Thank you.

FELBAB-BROWN: Well, thank you very much Dr. Siegle for both the very comprehensive and very sobering picture. But also, for your comments about Wagner, which I wholeheartedly agree with. And I would also just posit that not only is Wagner a focus on counterterrorism per say, I often just focus on economic activities and the role as a Praetorian Guard of regimes in power, but Wagner's also also Wagner and Russia by extension. Now also selling a very different vision of counterterrorism that replicates the Soviet experience in Afghanistan and Russia's experience in

Chechnya, centering on scorched earth policy brutalizing local populations, so they are driven away and no longer able to support, or at least forcibly support under coercion, the militant groups. So very different vision of counterterrorism, not just a failing one.

You know, in December of last year, the Africa Security Initiative, an initiative on nonstate armed actors I direct, held an event on Eastern Africa. And I made the comment at the time that we are seeing two acts of insecurity in Africa. One being the Sahel or somehow northern Africa that we just spoke about with Joe. But the other being the East, not just the Horn with the wars in Ethiopia and the persistent Shabaab spread, but spinning all the way through Tanzania, particularly southern Tanzania, to Mozambique. And when the Taliban took over Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, there was tremendous concern in Eastern Africa that we would see a similar al-Shabaab takeover of Somalia. And it was also the time where the al-Shabaab in Mozambique, an ISIS linked group, not linked to the al-Shabaab in Somalia, was spreading. But since then, we have been in a very different place. Last summer, we saw the rise of the al-Shabaab militias in Somalia. We have seen a new government launching several anti Shabaab offensives. And Mozambique is a place where regional forces of SADC and separately of Rwanda have managed to do what Wagner didn't and beat back al-Shabaab. Not defeat but beat back.

So, with that, I am absolutely delighted to turn to Dr. Tricia Bacon, an associate professor at the American University School of Public Affairs, to discuss with us what is the state of al-Shabaab, what is the state of terrorism in the Horn and in Africa's east. And how much are we, in fact, in a better place than we have been a year ago, three years ago, five years ago? Dr. Bacon directs the Policy Anti-Terrorism Hub at American University, and she comes with tremendous local experience from the analytical community and the policy world. Before joining the faculty of the American University, Dr. Bacon worked on counterterrorism issues for over, say, over ten years at the Department of State, including in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, the Bureau of Counterterrorism, and the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, and her work received numerous accolades. Moreover, Tricia has also studied some of the core policies that define the counterterrorism approach including issues such as decapitation, targeting, the leadership and reflected on the success, effectiveness, and challenges of these policies in two terrific books: "Terror in Transition: Leadership and Succession in Terrorist Organization" that came out last year and then earlier book, "Why Terrorist Organizations Form

International Alliances." Tricia, over to you. Is East Africa one place that we should be optimistic about?

BACON: Well, thank you Vanda very much for convening this panel. Thank you to Brookings. It really is a pleasure to be here and hear all the great insights from different parts of the world. And I think you're right that a year ago the picture looked pretty promising, right? We had a fairly new government elected in Somalia led by President Hassan Sheikh, that came and committed to countering al-Shabaab. And then there were these series of local uprisings against a group in Central Somalia and the Somali army was able to piggyback on these local uprisings and receive support from international partners and was able to roll back Shabaab's territory significantly. And some of these were areas that Shabaab had controlled for the better part of a decade. And Somalia is also unusual in that it's a place that the U.S. is fairly active on the counterterrorism mission. It is an area where we do still have a military role and a military presence. And so, there was a simultaneously an effort to freeze bank accounts and squeeze al-Shabaab's finances, especially its ability to tax in Mogadishu. And the group was struggling to conduct larger scale attacks at the time.

And so, the government was speaking very optimistically about this next phase of operations to clear out the group in its strongholds in the south. And it essentially promised a military defeat of the organization in a matter of months, as the African Union forces were drawing down and transitioning authority and responsibility to the Somali forces. And in this sort of euphoria of the situation last year, the government portrayed in negotiations is essentially something it would do once the group was defeated. And unfortunately, a year later, the momentum has really stalled and there has been backsliding on basically all of the fronts that I just talked about.

There is increasing frustration with the Hassan Sheikh government. There's persistent allegations of corruption and nepotism. We've seen a real decline of relations between the federal government and the state governments, known as federal member states. And this kind of political infighting has once again distracted from the effort against al-Shabaab. Al-Shaabab has been able to regain some of the territory it lost through some combination of violence, negotiations, and force. And in areas where the government has maintained control, it hasn't been able to show a dividend to the population. These are areas where we've seen an increase in instability, as feuds and sort of local rivalries that al-Shabaab had suppressed then reared their head again. And of course, al-Shabaab is trying to create instability in those areas to essentially show that the government is not a better

provider of security than the group. And al-Shabaab has been able to inflict pretty significant losses on the Somali forces in ambushes, and battles, and attacks. And it's clear that the Somalis don't have sufficient forces to hold the area that is cleared. Let alone do so and launch a new offensive at the same time.

And there's been more and more questions about the Somali forces ability to take the lead on security, as the African Union forces are still drawing down. And the plan for the offensive that was being touted last year looks increasingly shaky. It has, it was going to rely on Ethiopian forces, which of course, is a very triggering sort of galvanizing cause in Somalia. And there hasn't been local uprisings in southern Somalia the way that there have been in central Somalia. There wasn't any momentum gained further south in the areas that the group is at its strongest. We saw the group adapt to the financial pressure. Some of the bank accounts that were frozen appear not to have had any assets in them when they were frozen. And the group has really redoubled its ability to extort, quote unquote, tax businesses in southern Somalia, and appears to be financially stable again. And at this point, the government is still promising a military defeat of the organization in a matter of months. And rather than sounding optimistic, that now sounds kind of naive and fanciful. And the government really missed a window to start negotiations from a position of strength last year and is now once again in a stalemate.

And so, in some ways, there was so much optimism last year, but this year feels like Groundhogs Day of many years we've seen in the past in Somalia. Al-Shabaab has outlasted the pressure. It still remains a very sophisticated and unified organization. It is part insurgent group, part terrorist organization, part shadow government, part mafia. And it's equally effective, essentially, at all of those different parts. And in Somalia, Shabaab is essentially greater than the sum of its parts, while its adversaries are consistently less. So, it is an existential threat in Somalia still today. And it's worth reminding everyone that it's not just a Somali problem. This is an organization that conducted increasing attacks in Kenya over the summer, and it's been able to do a large-scale attack in Kenya every couple of years, with the most recent ones being in 2019 and 2020, creating concern that another is on the horizon. Last year, conducted a major assault on Ethiopia on the border.

And while this is a Somali centric and to some degree regional threat, it's also worth reminding ourselves that this is an organization that sent an operative to Southeast Asia to get flight training. And it's also an organization that managed to detonate a laptop explosive device on a plane.

So, it is a group that is a potent threat in the region. It's an existential threat in Somalia. And it's regained a position of relative threat. It's adaptable, it's resilient, and it's good at capitalizing on its adversaries' missteps and weaknesses. And I think, unfortunately today, al-Shabaab is one of the strongest, if not the strongest, jihadist organizations operating in the world.

FELBAB-BROWN: So much for my looking for a spot of optimism, perhaps beyond Mozambique. But I am not surprised, Tricia, by what you said. And I'm also not surprised to see the Groundhog Day come back in Somalia with very many of the issues that we saw repeatedly over the past two decades. But frankly, a Groundhog Day, or an issue that has been challenged in very many of these counterterrorism contexts. The problem with creating effective holding forces, generating them at a sufficiently robust scale, but also having their behavior or the behavior of militias linked to them, to be ultimately less pernicious and generate less instability than the insurgents that our forces themselves, do is an issue that we have seen in Afghanistan, Pakistan, we have seen across the Sahel, Nigeria, in various parts of the Middle East.

The unreliability and challenges of the presumed partners that often end up being bogged down in parochial politics among themselves, and focus on exclusionary, rent seeking, exclusionary extraction of resources for one's cliques and misdiverted attention from the counterterrorism picture. Something that was so characteristic of the Afghan Republic, and at core of its demise. And it is certainly true about counterterrorism efforts in northern Nigeria, as well as other security issues in southern Nigeria, to across the Sahel. The surprising but consistently shown resilience of terrorist groups that come under pressure, and the elusiveness and almost frequent failure to take resource-- financial resources away.

The limitations of taking away money through anti-money laundering approaches, through targeting the financial banking sectors, through material support clauses. Perhaps the one place where it might have worked was with al-Qaida core, after, in the immediate years after 9/11. But taking the money away has been the siren song that doesn't seem to have worked in any other context. So, I know Somalia is an epicenter of many of the challenges, and problems, and ultimately the almost unsurmountable obstacles to having counterterrorism efforts succeed that have plagued the past two decades, and they are going to be a major challenge.

I will turn to each of our very distinguished and superbly knowledgeable factors for their very quick thoughts on what are some of the core policy recommendations, as we go ahead. Whether

policy recommendations for combating terrorism broadly, or specific to particular areas. But before I do that, I want to remind our viewers that you can continue submitting questions. We have already received questions in advance, and I continue receiving them as the event is unfolding. If you want to submit questions, do so via email to events@brookings.edu, or you can also do it on Twitter using the #StateofTerrorism. And we will have plenty of time to take your questions and to discuss them. Before that, one more round of thoughts from our panelists. Bruce, let me start with you. What are the top line, the most important counterterrorism prescriptions you would make today?

HOFFMAN: Well, I mean, one of the biggest chapters in the book actually outlines immediate measures we have to take, measures that we could take to improve things in the medium-term, the next five to 10 years, and then long-term ones. But in the interest of time, let me focus on the one that you talked about earlier, which is definition of terrorism. And we're in an awkward position in the United States, I would argue, in that domestic terrorism is addressed in federal law. U.S. Code 18 U.S.C. 2331 Section Five defines domestic terrorism as the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce the government or the civilian population in the furtherance of political or social objectives. I mean, in my view, and I've argued this since January 6th, 2021, what happened that day conforms to terrorism. The problem is, in U.S. law, there are no chargeable offenses for domestic terrorism. Instead, we rely on homicide charges, using anabolic steroids or narcotics, and possessing firearms, arson, vandalism, kidnaping. And we have this awkward situation where we don't use the term terrorist. But think about it.

I mean, there's many things over the past two decades since the 9/11 attacks I could have never imagined would occur. Including the fact that the Taliban would reconquer Afghanistan. We're putting that aside. One of the main things is, some of our closest allies have designated terrorist groups based, well, designated groups, based in the United States as foreign terrorist organizations. Canada has identified five groups and one individual that are designated as foreign terrorists. And the UK and Australia have each indicated one. So, I mean, we have a problem that we refuse to address.

We don't call it terrorism. But I think this leads to profound disparities and inequities in sentencing. For example, the average person in the United States convicted of providing material support, which doesn't mean killing, shooting, blowing up things, but providing support, recruitment, radicalization, raising money for terrorist groups, is 13.5 years. Two members of a group known as "The Base," which is designated by Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom as a terrorist

organization, who were arrested in 2021, even with the terrorism enhancement statutes available to judges, received sentences of nine years. Makes no sense. I mean, these people were charged with plotting to cripple roads and attack power plants in the United States, as part of what I described earlier. This accelerationist strategy to cause a white uprising. They were accused of assassinating elected representatives, killing police officers, and overthrowing the U.S. government. They get nine years, as opposed to what an ISIS terror—providing material support to someone, by someone, to ISIS— gets. And even then, that's when a judge has to invoke terrorist enhancement statutes. We should call a crime what it is, and not dance around with these terms.

FELBAB-BROWN: Thanks very much. Certainly, the designation topic is one I'm very keen to come back to and have thoughts from everyone because, in many of the foreign contexts, the terrorist designation has, in my view, created tremendous straitjacket on policies and locked policies into problematic limits without excluding policy tools that would be desirable. So, I'm very keen to discuss on, can we move them to two decades later? Can we use the designation without falling into the traps that the designation comes back to--

HOFFMAN: Could I? I don't—I just want to be clear. I'm not advocating designating U.S. groups as terrorists. I mean, I'm saying that we have a problem, that our closest allies in the Five Eyes communities identified. I think we need domestic terrorism law, the same way we have hate crimes statutes. And hate crimes statutes also talk about shooting, bombing, arson, kidnaping, and so on. I mean, things that are crimes under any other statute. But they express society's opprobrium. They put these crimes in a special category. And if we do it for hate crimes, we should certainly be doing it for terrorism. And we saw some of this soft rhetorical sophistry in the sentencing last week of three of the leaders of the Proud Boys, where they're declaring they're not terrorists. As I said that definition, intimidating or coercing a government, and if that wasn't January 6, 2021, I don't know what was.

FELBAB-BROWN: Great job, absolutely. Looking forward to coming back to that. You know, how to, how to express the opprobrium, including legally, and yet avoid all the pitfalls that the FTO designation has created for U.S. policies, as well as other countries policies around the world. John, your thoughts on the more most important recommendations for the counterterrorism, broadly or specifically to the Afghanistan-Pakistan South Asia region?

SCHRODEN: Sure. I'll give you one of each, if I could. So, on the general aspect, I mean, a clear theme that emerges from this, this panel discussion is just how vast, and multivariate, and complicated, and expansive the terrorist threat has become, both domestic and internationally, in the 20 or 22 years since 9/11. And while the CT apparatus, the U.S. and global counterterrorism apparatus, also massively exploded, you know, over the first 18 years or so, 17 years after 9/11. Since the 2018 National Defense Strategy, and especially with the 2022 NDS coming much on the heels, and sort of amplifying the shift from U.S. strategic focus from counterterrorism to China, what we've seen over the last three years especially is a grand dismantling of the U.S. counterterrorism apparatus in a largely, I would argue, uncoordinated way. So, you have a national security strategy, a national defense strategy, that says China's the primary threat now to the U.S., and all of the executive agencies start to shift their focus massively in accordance with that. And they all individually start to take resources out of counterterrorism capabilities, counterterrorism accounts, and put them elsewhere.

And I don't think the administration has done a very good job of coordinating that across the U.S. government agencies. Like it's fine to try to move from a situation where lots of agencies have duplicative capabilities and are operating in similar ways — albeit perhaps in different locations — to something that's a more, you know, federated, coordinated, teamwork kind of approach. But that needs to be done deliberately. Where Agency X is focusing on capability X, Agency Y is focusing on capability Y. And together they still form the network of things that you need in order to keep a lid on counterterrorism. I'm not convinced the U.S. has done it as deliberately as that. I think a lot of it has occurred on an agency-by-agency basis. And that creates gaps and seams in the ability of the U.S. to track these threats globally, and to act when we see, you know, those threats rise to a certain level of concern.

So, that's sort of one thing on, generally, I think the U.S. government needs to do a much better job of looking at, what is its counterterrorism set of capabilities, what is that insurance policy that we need to have? How much does that need to cost and how much, you know, what does that need to look like? To be clear, there is an insurance policy that has to be paid by the U.S. government, effectively in perpetuity or as far out as we can see at this point, to keep the terrorism threat at a certain level that we find acceptable. And we just have to take that into our strategic

calculus. I'm not convinced we have yet sort of wrapped our mind around, or fully accepted that that's what the next 40 to 50 years are likely to contain.

On a specific to AfPak region, there's so much disparity amongst the various regional actors in the groups, etc. Though I find it helpful to look for commonalities as a place to start — like coming back to the one commonality, which is everyone in the region hates the ISIS Khorasan Province, to include the Taliban. And there is a global coalition against Daesh, right? There is this this coalition of 86 partners that was created to fight ISIS, mostly in Iraq and Syria, but continues to exist. I wonder if there is space to create some kind of regional forum for a regional approach or at least regional information if not intelligence sharing, amongst interested parties to combat ISKP in a more holistic way. And I would suggest that the Taliban should be allowed to be a partner in that as well. With the express sentiment statement, etc., that inclusion in that kind of partnership does not imply recognition or diplomatic status or any of the things that the Taliban might be seeking as a as a government, as a quasi-state. But nonetheless, they have an interest in countering ISIS, so does everyone else in the region. There's something there that could potentially be built on, and I'd like to see the U.S. try to do that.

FELBAB-BROWN: Very interesting idea. Certainly, one that would be very controversial, with many to suggest that the Taliban be included in any such forum. And regardless of the rhetoric or recognition or not, certainly it's something that the Taliban would exploit in its effort to say that they are de facto, it's not that you're recognized. But as you said, John, they have been the principal anti-ISK actor with a significant effort dedicated, for their own self-interest, obviously, against it. And, of course, you spoke about the grand dismantling of the U.S. counterterrorism apparatus, a very powerful phrase.

Well, I agree very much with your assessment that that's indeed what we are seeing in very many domains. And that also generates incentives for other countries to be engaging in similar grand dismantling, especially if they are not facing the immediate threat like countries in the Sahel, for example. Yeah, you know, the terrorism issue in the Middle East is a tricky one. It is often frequently used by governments as an excuse not to be engaging in other policies, other security policies, social policies, and yet the threat is there. What is your top recommendation, or top set of recommendations on how to deal with terrorism in Syria, Iraq, the Middle East, broadly?

MIRONOVA: I would just follow what I was talking before about prosecution. And I totally agree with you, that there is a very big problem of prosecuting ISIS members. I face it myself working for UNITAD. But we should try to find a middle ground. So, for example, we should not follow ISIS lobbying and portray them as victims. Like, you know, again, waiting for them with balloons. With ISIS foreign fighters coming home, you know, with balloons. So um, and plus, we've heard a lot of statements from ISIS females in al-Hol. A lot of, you know, the Internet is spammed by their addresses, they're pleaded to home countries to take them. But we-- my folder, spam folder, is full of threats coming from ISIS female in al-Hol camp. But the question is, why? I never ever heard anyone from al-Hol camp doing a video statement apologizing to Iraqi or Syrian community. Not even once. Not not any female, not any male. No one. Never. So, that's very very strange I find.

Plus, also, which [inaudible] that in many countries, for example, the former Soviet Union, ISIS militants just paid just \$15,000 to \$20,000 to the court. And not only their file was clean, like they were not, they were let out, but also, they were clean. So, their passport was returned and they're free to travel now. So, I interviewed, I think, like 10, 15 males, ISIS members who've openly said that they paid in a court, so they're free to go. So, I think that more, for example, U.N. should should look at that more carefully. About whom is being taken home and how they at least, you know, they investigated these men or what they did. And for example, Uzbekistan just literally gave a blank amnesty. They didn't say we couldn't prosecute them. They said everyone who comes home gets amnesty. And there are women we know who had slaves. So, I think there should be more oversight by, for example, U.N. on how countries are prosecuting ISIS members.

FELBAB-BROWN: Well, this is certainly an issue that has also come up very much in the context of defectors. And again, how one moves away from the highly problematic overcriminalization, to also not just indeed giving blank amnesties, and to building in accountability, recognizing victims' rights, but also not perpetuating the sense that one can literally engage in murder, or terrorist murder, and then be appointed the minister of religious affairs. I'll just have you know that I am referring to Somalia, a place where balancing accountability with not overcriminalization, has been a very significant challenge, just as it is with really the enormously problematic situation with the ISIS detention camps in Syria. And I agree with you. There are the Jeddah camps in Iraq, are in better shape. There is more of a structured program, more of an assessment, more of an effort to

rehabilitate that also seeks to focus on communities, although still very much a long way to go. But the Syrian detention camps are a bomb waiting to go off.

MIRONOVA: Actually, corruption in terms of prosecution in Iraq went. There-- my favorite case is that if you're in Mosul and you were ISIS, you could buy yourself a status of a spy. Like, that's how far corruption goes. So, for example, all your neighbors knew that you were in ISIS, and you're like, "Oh I'm sorry, guys, I was actually spying for government, so I'm actually a hero, here you go." And those are openly on sale or low-level fighters — ISIS members, Iraqis, not foreign — who couldn't afford that position. They just join [inaudible] in there, I mean yeah, Shia [inaudible]. And they again, they say they have a uniform.

FELBAB-BROWN: Oh, absolutely. The issue of corruption, in both the assessments that are conducted in the defector camps or in the detention camps, but also within the judicial system, are enormous. Both accusing any Sunni of being an ISIS member to claim his property or family properties, as many of the premier officials shall be forced to live, or vice versa. Buying oneself a blank ticket out. Joe, I know you have perhaps some of the toughest aid up for recommendation because the Sahel is so hot. You know, how do we deal with places like Mali and Burkina Faso that you characterize as potentially the whole country falling into the hands of terrorist groups that, yes, have been regionally and locally focused but could provide safe havens? What broader lessons of counterterrorism should we adopt, or should we avoid in West Africa?

SIEGLE: Yeah, thanks, Vanda. Well, I think that's where I would start. I think anything I propose is going to be hard, but I think the outcome or the trajectory we're on is going to be worse. And so, I do think we need to think more creatively and proactively about what's going to, you know, what we can do, and to realize it's, you know, trying to react to the fall of either these countries is gonna be much harder than trying to engage and try to stabilize where we're at. So, I think that's the first takeaway.

I think the, you know, the second reality is that neither these countries are going to be able to stabilize situations on their own. The insecurity, the the level of momentum of the extremist groups, has grown to such an extent that you're going to need some sort of regional engagement to help stabilize, as we saw with SADC and Mozambique at a much earlier stage. And so, anything that we, the United States, or international community does, I think needs to be done through and with ECOWAS and with the African Union. I think this problem is bigger than ECOWAS, And of course,

ECOWAS is currently in a fraught situation vis-à-vis the military juntas. Nonetheless, it remains an essential, the essential regional body for trying to come up with a regional stabilization effort in Mali and Burkina Faso. I think, too, we need to realize that, you know, security is more than just supporting security forces. And as I mentioned in my remarks, you know, military governments have not been very effective.

So, we need a more broad-based government that can be more inclusive, can engage and mobilize more domestic support, can build a broader coalition. Indeed, the history of counterinsurgencies and successful counterinsurgency shows the importance of having some sort of legitimate government that's going to be investing in people, can build trust, can be helping to pursue population-centric strategies. And so, I think what needs to be done is to really start engaging both in Mali and in Burkina Faso, to hasten a transition to civilian-led governments. Some sort of power-sharing government that is inclusive across the various political actors that are out there, many who have been repressed under the juntas. But to begin to engage them, and look at, you know, what are ways forward. And I think, you know, through those dialogs with the juntas to, you know, put it starkly for them that, you know, engaging in that transition now could be far better for you than waiting for the situation to collapse. And, and as part of that negotiation, you know, retaining intact the military structures and institutions.

But finding exit strategies for the junta leaders in these countries is what we should be doing. In both cases, the juntas had agreed to transitions, they just keep putting them off. So, I think we really need to hold their feet to the fire. And this is and stop looking at this as just national-level security-- a national security issue, and recognize it's a regional international issue, and try to move it forward that way. And with that in place, you have a much better basis then to engage regional actors, international actors, you know, the EU was ramping up engagement in the Sahel prior to the coups. And they're going to be integral to moving this forward. Can we build coalitions with the Tuareg, who the juntas-- who the juntas have alienated. They're going to be critical for stabilization in the north of Mali in particular. So, whole host of things that can be done. But I would put that forward for us to think about.

FELBAB-BROWN: Well, of course, how to hold the junta's feet to the fire and to make them execute on the promise to transition power is the real challenge, certainly. Countries like the United States are not willing and are not going to be willing in any foreseeable future, to put military forces

behind this such threat. And as ECOWAS, I think finds itself even in real challenge to deliver on its threats, to reverse the power, the power take over by junta in Niger. So, go ahead.

SIEGLE: Yeah, I would say, you know, military force is one tool, but I think there's more that can be done on the political-economic side. You know, these regimes, these juntas, are reeling, and, you know, their only lifeline has been with Wagner. But, you know, the Russians are not putting resources in. And so, I think there is a space to engage, and looking at ways that, you know, the juntas and these military actors can, you know, reimagine their relationships with the region and with, with the international community.

FELBAB-BROWN: Very interesting part, I mean perhaps a very interesting window of opportunity that might close quite rapidly. Certainly, the junta's sense that they can show up among new friends, namely Russia and China, has been a very sig-- and their ability, frankly, to withstand Western sanctions, has been a crucial part of their calculations. Just to preface, on September 21st, the Initiative on Nonstate Armed Actors is holding an event on the future of the Wagner Group in Africa. What has it accomplished? What has it perpetrated? And what kind of replacement structures and restructuring we are seeing? So just thought here on seizing the moment of opportunity, will be something very important to reflect for us as we speak on that panel about the future of Wagner in Africa and the Middle East.

Tricia, last policy recommendations before I go to questions from the audience to you. How do we finally in Somalia escape the Groundhog Day? How are we going to get beyond the problems of militias becoming as much of a problem or more than al-Shabaab, the holding forces never materializing, the benefits to communities in the formal build never coming up, and being that parochial politics zapping the political focus?

BACON: I think you just laid out an impossible equation, right? I think the things that have to be done to really change the trajectory of the conflict in Somalia are things like equal investment in stabilization and negotiations, as there is in military action. But I don't think there's an appetite for that in this environment. There is no Wagner in Somalia, right? This is not a site of great power competition; this is sort of a residual CT effort that is probably pretty fragile. I don't think there's a ton of appetite for risk. And so, you know, the U.S. is still involved in Somalia, but I don't-- there isn't an appetite to do much more. And so, I don't think that the sort of circumstances are right to really change the environment, which makes, I think, the squandering of the opportunities last year

particularly painful. There is not going to be more donor appetite to fund the African Union or other kinds of peacekeeping forces. I mean, if anything, the resources in trajectory are going to-- attention are gonna decline. And so, I think we're in a pretty difficult situation in Somalia in terms of the-- how the trajectory of the conflict overall. And I guess not, so I don't have a policy recommendation that I could make that would actually be feasible in this environment, that would actually, that would really genuinely change the situation.

And I do just think it's worth kind of wrapping up by pointing out something that I think we all know but maybe don't necessarily communicate, which is to remember how resilient these jihadist organizations are, right? We've declared victory over the Taliban in 2001, and the Islamic State in Iraq in 2009, 2010, the Pakistani Taliban in 2014, al-Shabaab in 2014, al-Shabaab last year. And these, these organizations have the ability to resurge, and I think that also injects a note of caution. And when we talk about al-Qaida today, that we don't-- we consistently underestimate the ability of these organizations to resurge. And we declare them as defeated when they experienced a lot of military losses, for example, but they consistently reemerge again. And, you know, Shabaab is the perfect example of that and why that conflict has been so intractable. But I don't think it's unique to al-Shabaab either.

FELBAB-BROWN: Just one other follow up, could you, Tricia, on the policy recommendations. If we can change the dynamics in Somalia so little and are seeing them again at best stalled or deteriorate, be downgrading again. What about focusing on the regional spillover? Should we be doing more with the Kenyans? How can we engage the Ethiopians? A country that bare-- you know, finally barely came out of the extraordinarily traumatic brutal civil war in Tigray that killed several hundred thousand people, but that is experiencing the instability/civil war, or just the cusp of civil war in the Amhara Region. And where problems could recently could easily intensify very rapidly in Oromia and even afar. What should we be doing with the Ethiopia? Should we be delinking them from Somalia instead of relying on Ethiopia to be such an important counterterrorism actor there? What about Kenya?

BACON: I think that there isn't avoiding that the Ethiopians are going to have a persistent interest in the situation in Somalia, even if the African Union forces completely draw down. I would expect Ethiopia to remain an active element, and the Kenyans, because these are both things that threaten their security as well. So, I don't. I think that the regional actors are continuing to be pivotal.

But I do think this is the area where great power considerations do start to crowd in, and how China is engaged with Ethiopia and in Kenya. And so, we do start to have sort of the layering of counterterrorism and great power competition concerns, you know, moving uneasily around one another. It's certainly been the case that al-Shabaab has struggled to actually penetrate Ethiopia.

So, Ethiopia is, thus far has been effective at sort of mitigating the al-Shabaab threat even in the midst of a civil war. But Kenya has continued to be the soft spot for the region in terms of al-Shabaab's ability to recruit, to conduct small-scale regular attacks, and large-scale attacks. I think that there still is a lot of work to be done in terms of cooperation on this front with the Kenyans. And this has to be an area where the U.S. does maintain its counterterrorism engagement, just like it is in Somalia.

FELBAB-BROWN: Terrific. Thank you all enormously for just this brilliant and very comprehensive insights on much of the globe, we haven't been speaking about terrorism in Southeast Asia, a place where terrorism is weaker, perhaps dormant, but certainly hardly completely disappeared. Nor have we spoken about terrorism in Latin America. All this is controversial issues, but nonetheless, there is at least recruitment and financing by groups, such as Hezbollah. And there are other concerns, whether legitimate or exaggerated, at various times. But perhaps we can come to some of these other regions in the Q&A. But I do want to spend the last 30 minutes taking questions from the audience and be respectful of their engagement and their thoughts and interests. So, perhaps I'll direct some of the questions to particular speakers. Another case, with like with the first question that I will pick from the audience question, I'll ask all of you.

And perhaps, just to change the directions, let me start with actually you, Tricia, and go backwards. The first question has a journalist asking whether the post-9/11 conceptualization of the counterterrorism effort as a global war on terrorism made things better or worse? And let me kind of add to that, what are each of your views where the core policies of the period that got policy right, that produce significant accomplishments? And what were, what were the core tenets of policies that turned out to be big mistakes? Tricia, let me start with you, please.

BACON: I think that there have certainly been successes in this effort. I mean, the biggest one being that there wasn't another major attack in the United States in the intervening years. So, it's hard to declare it sort of bankrupt from that perspective when you think about especially the sense of threat immediately after 9/11. So, I think from that perspective, there have been some successes. And

as I mentioned, some of these organizations have been very seriously weakened. And the problem has been consolidating that weakness and moving beyond the ability to inflict sort of military losses on these organizations to some kind of more enduring — not necessarily defeat — but some kind of more enduring weakness of these organizations, and not letting them resurge. So, I do think that there is a role. You know, the war on terrorism concept had flaws, to be sure, but there certainly was a military component to countering the threat. But I think that it became too military-centric overall. And we saw the limits of the ability to use that tool in order to weaken this broader movement as a whole. And its different regions it was weakened, and now we see a new region become the epicenter in sub-Saharan Africa. And so, there's the countries that are affected by jihadism in Africa today were unimaginable 20 years ago, that we would see this kind of threat.

So, I think that there has been some very distinct losses and failures, like in Africa, but there have been successes like what Vera talked about in weakening the Islamic State, using a global coalition, that al-Qaida is weakened from where it was twenty-years ago. Even if you believe the U.N. over the U.S. intelligence officials, there's still clearly been a weakening of the organization. So, I guess I can't give it a firm answer one way or another. I would say it's a very much a mixed report card.

FELBAB-BROWN: Joe, to you. What were some of the elements of the global war on terror that got it right, that were used good outcomes? And what were some of the elements of that conceptualization that turned out to be mistakes?

SIEGLE: Yeah. Well, obviously, the question is something we could do a whole nother panel on. But I would just briefly say, you know, I think the conceptualization of terrorism as a monolithic entity is problematic from a conceptual standpoint, rather than focusing on the individual organizations that were perpetuating terrorism, and that directs a whole set of different types of attacks. In Africa, for example, there are some two dozen militantismist groups. And I think trying to understand how each of them operates is the way that ultimately, they're going to be dismantled.

That said, you know, by talking and thinking about terrorism coalitions-- there has been the anti-ISIS coalition that has built, you know, brought in, you know, I think up to 100 countries now, that are part of that coalition in one way or another. And I think that's important just to recognize that this is an ongoing challenge that will require ongoing coordination. I think the last thing I would say, in terms of needing to focus on and maybe getting it wrong, is you know, in the end, and as Tricia made the

point, you know, these groups are resilient. And so, to defeat them, governments are going to have to also be resilient. And that's going to require investing more in institutions that can sustain that pressure, can sustain better government, can sustain development activities, that can hold and reclaim territory. And sometimes the focus on terrorism, we miss that. We're focused too much on the threat rather than how do you actually stabilize these places over the long-term.

FELBAB-BROWN: And of course, when we tried stabilizing them, we have run into the issues of parochialism, banality, corruption. Perfect comfort on the part of many of our peers and partners to have conflict brewing, as long as they still can access resources. Though I would just add my thoughts, I have often suggested that our problem really has not been the terrorists, or our bigger problem has not been the terrorists, but the presumed government partners of with whom we have been trying to defeat the terrorists, or for that matter, the militia partners with whom we have been trying to defeat the terrorists. Vera, your thoughts, please. What has worked?

MIRONOVA: Oh, can you hear me? Yeah. Okay. I think it's like, very hard to say what we got right now because the environment develops, environment changes, and the groups do catch up, right? Tricia said that they move now to different areas. If we look at before 9/11, for example, the conflict with jihadist was in a different part of the world. Right now, for example, like Chechnya, there is no conflict with jihadist, although there was once. Now Chechens move to other parts of the world to fight. And before, we didn't have social media, we didn't have a developed Internet, so we didn't even have the problem of terrorism content online that we now do face and are really trying to fight, and so on. So, so basically it does change with the environment. And it's not even before or after 9/11, just, you know, was, it related to new development about um, as previous speakers said, countries became more sharing information, working together to fight against terrorists. But at the same time, you know, some of the governments, while they're in coalition, still are not doing their part.

FELBAB-BROWN: And John, please.

SCHRODEN: Yeah, it's um...All right, so let me, I'll start with what we did right. I think we created a whole suite of exquisite tactical tools and approaches that were very effective at finding specific terrorist individuals and eliminating them through either kill or capture or, you know, other types of neutralization operations. The U.S. special operations community, the U.S. intelligence community, combined with a lot of international partners of the same types, as well as State Department, Treasury Department. Right. I mean, all of the parts of the U.S. government came

together in ways that were unheard of prior to the global war on terror, prior to 9/11, to get after this problem. And they did that with a huge number of tactical successes that were incredibly impressive in some regards. I mean, the bin Laden raid is sort of premier among them, but there are many other examples like that.

The challenge, the problem, though, is those were all tactical successes. And we did a very poor job of knitting those together into any type of strategic level success against this problem setup, right? To Tricia's point, right, we did a bunch of things where we we had groups on the ropes and we declared them defeated and walked away, only for them to come back again. We made a bunch of terrible strategic decisions in the name of the global war on terror that had little, if anything, to do with terrorism. Right. Invading Iraq, the intervention in Libya, the, you know, the poorly negotiated and then hastily executed withdrawal from Afghanistan. These were, these were terrible strategic decisions made in areas that were rife with the threat of terrorism. And our poor strategic choice then cracked open the security environments in these regions and allowed terrorist groups to flourish in in the aftermath of them. So, we made a bunch of really poor strategic choices, and we were unable to knit together tactical successes from our counterterrorism apparatus to anything approaching a strategic outcome.

And I would say that the two main reasons for that particular part is we never had a vision for what the end of the global war on terror would look like, what the end of these terrorist groups would look like, if we were ever able to bring it about. I would contend we still don't know what that would look like. We still don't have a vision for what that future is. And we also took, we took the awesome machine, as people like Stan McChrystal describe the U.S. counterterrorism apparatus, and we applied it in way too many cases to insurgent groups. And you cannot defeat an insurgent group using a purely counterterrorism approach. And we tried to do that in a lot of different cases. And it has never worked in any of those cases.

FELBAB-BROWN: Bruce, your reflections in this round.

HOFFMAN: Yeah. There I go. Well, Jonathan, I think is very compellingly and cogently articulated the fact that we confuse tactics and strategy and basked in the success of tactics, but just mortgaged the strategy. I mean, what we did best, I think incontrovertibly, and this was, is been a huge accomplishment, as we've kept the homeland safe. I was across 395 from the Pentagon on September 11th, 2001. And I think, like many people that day, I thought the beg-- World War III had

started, this was really the beginning of a more serious campaign, then as tragic as that day was, but it was not a sustained campaign. Al-Qaida just didn't have the ability. But we thought there'd be more attacks. And for more than two decades, we've thwarted al-Qaida's attempts to do so. So that's a huge accomplishment.

But at the same time, as virtually everyone else has said before, we've locked ourselves into this unending war. We can say that it's over, and we have said so many times since the withdrawal from Afghanistan. In fact, when you think about it, the 2020 presidential election, the only issue that President Trump and Vice President Biden agreed on was ending the endless wars. But the point is, we have an end to them. Al-Qaida can claim credibly to have withstood the most technologically advanced military in the history of mankind. The Taliban is back in power. And as we've heard, you know throughout the past, you know, nearly 2 hours, very serious terrorist threats exist in many corners of the world. So, that's our ultimate failure, just as we've heard. I mean, we were very effective tactically, but we consistently failed to break the cycle of recruitment, radicalization and recruitment, which sustain these movements. And we've never effectively countered the resonance of their message or their narrative.

FELBAB-BROWN: If you'd allow me to introduce some additional thoughts of mine as I am watching the clock and will not be able to take a lot of the other questions but want to preserve some. I would highlight two areas where we haven't-- one area that we have spoken about, and one area that we haven't, that come into the bucket of either altogether favors or problems. One is the balancing and challenging of civil liberties and human rights with the counterterrorism, law enforcement imperatives, and often enormously problematic decisions taken. Whether it was extraordinary renditions of torture or enhanced interrogation tactics that they were taken, perpetrated by us, by the United States, but also by partner countries with whom we did not-- we did not effectively sanction and punish for their vast and egregious engagement in such activities, often on enormous scale. And yet the governments that were our partners have been able to often get away with that.

The second problem, challenge, failure, that I want to highlight is precisely that the way the terrorist label, the FTO designation, shrank policy to such an extent that demobilization, reintegration assistance, would become impossible, that providing assistance to children that were born in Boko Haram areas would be considered material support for terrorist groups. And the only way a kid could

receive some rehabilitation assistance, and the teddy bear, and a pencil, would be as long as they did not take it out of the rehabilitation camp, despite the fact that that eight-year-old, six year old, ten year old could in no way be held liable. And these consequences of designating a group, and then really constricting the space essentially to the military, prosecution, criminal, law enforcement tool, and limiting ability to deliver economic assistance, rehabilitation assistance, DVR assistance, to communities that suffered from terrorism is still something that we really struggle with in country after country that is contending with terrorism or post-terrorism segments.

Let me take a set of questions, or bundle them together, and start with... Bruce, you. They are focused on the right-wing terrorism, extremism, in the United States. But I welcome anyone else's thoughts of their-- on that issue. Either in the United States or its similar problems in other parts of the world, such as Europe. So, one question asks, "What is an aspect of domestic terrorism, right-wing extremism, that is not getting sufficient attention, that you think much more focus needs to be better from the FBI or from other actors, societal or law enforcement?" But I would add to it another question, which is, there's been far more focus in the Department of Defense on dealing with the risk of a right-wing, of right-wing, infiltration into the U.S. military or being manifested among that. It's been far more of a struggle to do so with the level of police departments. In my own view, perhaps one of the most insidious threats of driving terrorism, extremism, is the infiltration capture of-- or captures the struggle. So more of an infiltrated presence in local law enforcement forces. How do we deal with that?

HOFFMAN: Well, let me emphasize too that this military extremism, at both ends of the spectrum, focus on active duty veterans, reservists, National Guardsmen, to recruit because they have a variety of skill sets that are very useful to persons of a conspiratorial mindset, no matter if they're far left or right. So, both are, both are targeted for recruitment or for radicalization. I suppose historically we've seen more problems and more of an affinity to violent far-right extremism, as indeed, you know, Secretary of Defense Austin's memo to the to the entire Defense Department and then the one day stand down they had that was an educational opportunity.

You're right to focus on the problems of of police. A release, for instance, last year of Oath Keepers membership showed conservatively numbers in the in the thousands, which I think may have only been as a snapshot. You know, one of the, one of the issues is that only 18 states out of the 50 states in the U.S. actually have any kinds of programs that require law enforcement and prosecutors

to go through, you know, hate crime training. So, there's very low, at least until recently, low emphasis on training and educating law enforcement officers about the importance of applying the law equitably. And also, of responding to the very, I think, unique demands that are created by hate crimes. And this extends to victims' advocates as well, who may have training in how to counsel someone when they've been a victim of a violent crime, but really are completely clueless, in many instances, clueless in the sense that there's no standardized training to instruct them on how to assist people who are victims of hate crimes, which could be online harassment, bullying, racism, anti-Semitism, and so on. So, law enforcement is a huge problem, and it's one, as I said, that only 18 states actually take seriously, providing training for hate crime. So right there, we see a problem.

In terms of what is going neglected, I mean, I think that, you know, algorithmic reforms, I mean the algorithms of many social media sites are oriented towards pointing people towards affinities, and that often towards intolerance, hatred leading to violence. I mean, there can be better efforts, perhaps through the reform of Section 230 30 of the Communications Decency Act, for example. But I would say for me, the most important area — I don't necessarily think this is neglected, there's more attention on it, but I think it's the most vital — is juveniles. I mean, we see throughout the world. I mean, you yourself know this. I know all the panelists refer to us, but you were just talking about, you know, children who've been victims of Boko Haram. I mean, terrorist groups worldwide focus on children and on radicalizing young people.

I mean, there's no federal statutes in the United States, for instance, that you can try juveniles for hate crimes, for example. They have to be prosecuted, if they are at all, on state criminal ordinances. So, focusing on juveniles, and we know this is a huge problem, especially on gaming platforms, that it's not just exclusively social media that is accounting for radicalization and recruitment, but also many gaming platforms are being used. And of course, there's tremendous, tremendous proclivity and affinity of young people to these platforms. So, we have to do more, I would argue worldwide, as we've been discussing, to break this pattern of recruitment and radicalization, but especially amongst young people.

FELBAB-BROWN: Thanks very much, Bruce. Vera, John, Joe, Tricia, any of you would like to comment on those questions before I turn to another set of questions? I don't see anyone raising that hand or turning the mic on. So, let me start, Joe, with you in the second round of questions which asks about China's role in counterterrorism. We spoke about the Wagner group, Russia's unruly

proxy, and its promise to sell effective counterterrorism services across the Middle East and Africa. But what has China been doing? What is China's approach to counterterrorism? What kind of tools, messaging has China been adopting for stabilization, for counterterrorism? Let's start with Africa. We'll come to Jon for the Middle East, for the South Asia space, as well as Tricia and Vera.

SIEGLE: Yeah, well, you know, China has not been a central player on, you know, in the counterterrorism, you know, body of action in Africa. That said, I mean, China has definitely been ramping up its support for security cooperation on the continent. And, you know, they also have been active with U.N. peacekeeping operations. And in the process, trying to institutionalize their engagements on the continent. So, a lot of what China has been doing is trying to support regime-centric security approaches. You know, trying to institutionalize one-party governance mechanisms where militaries are supportive of the parties, and so, the very regime-centric strategies. But in that process, I think China has been caught flat footed in responding to the deterioration of the situations we've seen in the Sahel. You know, they've not been active in any of the other major violent extremist theaters we've seen on the continent.

FELBAB-BROWN: Tricia, anything you would like to add on China? It's been actively engaged in Somalia, more so than other parts, many other parts of Africa.

BACON: Yeah, I think we feel the Chinese presence most acutely in places like Djibouti, right where we have a military base, and the Chinese are also, of course, running a pretty substantial-- have a pretty substantial presence. It has, it has been more of the kind of economic assistance we've seen in other countries. And China, interestingly, just hasn't drawn the ire of jihadist groups the way that one might have predicted. The weaker plight has not seized the jihadist movement beyond the Uyghurs, themselves, really. And China hasn't sort of been identified as an, as a sort of structural enemy or a sort of world power enemy in the way the United States has, or increasingly Russia to, with the way it's intervening. So, China's kind of sitting in a in a position where it has a lot of influence on these governments, but it's not really drawing the threat from these organizations.

FELBAB-BROWN: Indeed. Stunningly so how many of the Islamist actors have been dead silent on China, including in the Afghanistan-Pakistan space, which is an opportunity to hear from Jon about China and counterterrorism in Afghanistan. John, you already spoke about ETIM and the limits of the Taliban's actions amidst its silence and condemning the Uyghur issue. Any other thoughts you have on China, TTP, China, ETIM, ISK?

SCHRODEN: So, I think the probably the closest you'll get to seeing Islamists go after China would be in the AfPak region. I mean, there have been, there have been a few attacks on Chinese diplomats in Pakistan, as well as there was a hotel in Kabul that was frequented by Chinese businessmen that was attacked. ISKP, I believe, claimed that attack. So, there have been some attacks against China-- Chinese individuals in the region by the likes of ISIS, ETIM, I spoke about earlier. But China's primary response has been twofold. One is they-- there are open reports of Chinese military working with Tajikistan, elements of the Tajikistani military and/or border police. Possibly even being permanently stationed with some of Tajikistan's forces on a couple of outposts along the border. There's been some good open-source reporting about that. So, they're clearly doing some amount of security cooperation with Tajikistan to try and secure that northern border.

They've also been heavily engaged with the Taliban, trying to impress upon the Taliban to take action against the ETIM. The Taliban early on, you know, moved some ETIM members away from the border, relocated some of their camps. And I think they were hoping that in response, China would kind of open the economic floodgates and come in and, you know, be a bit of a benefactor to them. That didn't happen. China has sort of toed the international party line on recognition, and what it would take to get the recognition. And they've been really quite reticent in, you know, moving into Afghanistan too hastily on the economic front. And so, the Taliban have kind of responded that by saying, "Okay. Well then, ETIM, you can sort of do what you want within a certain degree of constraints." And that's sort of the situation with China right now in the AfPak Region.

FELBAB-BROWN: Vera, what are you seeing about Chinese counterterrorism security assistance activities in the Middle East, if anything?

MIRONOVA: To be fairly honest, I don't see anything. And even, I was thinking about it, like I don't see a lot of even use of Uyghur issue in propaganda among the fellows I'm closely watching. For example, Russian speakers or local folks in Iraq and Syria. They just kind of ignored it. And there is, also like, if I am talking about foreigners, there is kind of an official division that Uyghur issue kind of belongs to al-Qaida. You know, so there is a group of Uyghurs active in Idlib, but ISIS is less into that. So, it's kind of-- they are not. ISIS foreigners are not even following this issue. It kind of fell to al-Qaida and they left it there.

FELBAB-BROWN: Thank you. Bruce, your thoughts on China? And perhaps, given where we are at on time, I will make that the last comment from our speaker. So, if you want to bridge it into a larger takeaway, please go for it.

HOFFMAN: You know, I don't follow China closely enough to really offer an opinion, I think. So, I'll pass on that.

FELBAB-BROWN: Well, let me then add some few observations of mine on China, which is that we have seen a significant increase in the presence of Chinese military companies in places like Africa. But unlike the Wagner group, they are solely focused on protecting Chinese workers. We have not yet seen China really offering the private military security companies as a larger tool of the host governments for either praetorian service, in the way Iran has been doing, let alone for larger counterterrorism, counter-insurgency action.

But where China is very dominant, very active — even if it does not necessarily label it as counterterrorism — is in the sale of online monitoring technological tools to deal with crime. Often the phrasing is that these tools are anti-crime law enforcement platforms. But very obviously, they have implications and applications in the counterterrorism space as well. China has been on a major kick to sell them across Africa, across Southeast Asia, and increasingly also in Latin America where tens of countries are buying them and raising the concerns about, what are the appropriate boundaries of law enforcement, human rights, and civil liberties. What are the appropriate boundaries between privacy and transparency for law enforcement? And could those technologies be also used as a backdoor for China spying? Certainly, the first two questions are the question that the West has grappled with and continues to grapple with. The right division, the right merging of the necessity to support human rights and protect human rights and civil liberties and empower law enforcement to-- law enforcement and its tools to be effective, as something that we will continue dealing with as the challenge of terrorism, if not the war on terrorism, will remain with us for decades to come.

With that, let me, let me thank all of our panelists for their tremendously insightful comments, for their willingness to share two hours with us today. And I would say, crucially for all of their work on counterterrorism, on dealing with extremism, which has been fundamental as well as influential. Many many thanks to our viewers for sharing two hours of their time with us today. I look forward to engaging with many of you in two upcoming events that we have in the Initiative or Nonstate Armed Actors. One, as I mentioned, is on September 21st, an event on the future of Wagner Group in Africa,

Middle East, and Europe. And on October 2nd, we will be discussing organized crime in the Southern Cone in Ecuador, Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay. Thank you.