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Commentary

The 2026 US Counterterrorism Strategy: An Analysis

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Summary

The 2026 US Counterterrorism Strategy elevates drug cartels and 'violent left-wing extremists' to centrality, alongside the traditional Islamic threat.

The White House released the 'U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy' on 6 May 2026,[1] the first dedicated counterterrorism (CT) strategy since 2018. It represents a fundamental reorientation of US counterterrorism doctrine since 9/11. The 2011 Obama administration strategy document as well as the 2018 Trump administration document placed Sunni Jihadist organisations such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State at the centre of the threat analysis. The new strategy elevates drug cartels and 'violent left-wing extremists' to centrality, alongside the traditional Islamic threat.

'Three Types of Terror Groups'

The CT strategy document demarcates 'three types of terror groups'—narco-terrorists and transnational gangs; legacy Islamist terrorists; and violent left-wing extremists consisting of anarchists and anti-fascists. This tripartite threat formulation is the key feature of the document. The strategy mentions that 'terrorist threat has changed',[2] and the US now confronts 'new combination and categories of violent actors'[3] that have rendered the traditional CT measures obsolete or insufficient. The three major functions of the new CT strategy are to identify various threat actors and plots before they can carry out attacks, to take down their arms, funding, and recruiting mechanisms and support, and ultimately to uproot and destroy the entire established networks and threat groups.

The ordering of components in the strategy is itself revealing, signalling the relative priorities assigned to each threat category. The first is 'neutralisation of hemispheric terror threats'[4] by offensive action against cartel networks and stripping them of their operational capabilities. This aligns with Trump's administration's January 2025 categorisation of several gangs and cartels as 'Foreign Terrorist Organisations' (FTOs).[5]

The second priority is accorded to the targeting and destruction of 'top five Islamist terror groups'[6] which are considered capable of conducting external operations against the US. This list includes the Islamic State, ISIS, Muslim Brotherhood, ISIS-Khorasan and al-Qaeda and their aggressive sub-groups like AQAP. The strategy also

[1] **"US Counterterrorism Strategy"**, The White House, 2026.

[2] Ibid., p. 5.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., p. 6.

[5] **"Designating Cartels and Other Organizations as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Global Terrorists"**, The White House, 20 January 2025.

[6] **"US Counterterrorism Strategy"**, p. 7.

calls for extending FTO designation to organisations affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Third, national counterterrorism resources are to be directed towards identifying and dismantling 'violent secular political groups', with Antifa explicitly named.

Lastly, the strategy puts the non-state acquisition and use of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) in a distinct category termed a 'no-fail' mission. In this context, the administration has re-classified fentanyl and its precursor chemicals as WMD, one of the most consequential steps taken to curb the fentanyl crisis within the United States.

This hierarchy is reinforced in the strategy's regional sections as well. The first section focuses on the Western Hemisphere, framed as a 'Trump Corollary'[7] to the Monroe Doctrine. It outlines an aggressive posture towards cartel networks, including references to strike packages along the lines of 'Operation Absolute Resolve' carried out to extract Venezuela's President Maduro. This is followed by the section on West Asia, which reiterates the first-term rules of engagement, including sustained pressure on Iran, delegation of strike authority to combatant commanders, and actions in the Red Sea against the Houthis.

Europe receives prominent attention.[8] Mass migration into Europe is framed as a 'transmission belt' for terrorism. The European allies are urged to shoulder the burden of CT, including in Africa. The section on Africa essentially demarcates two core objectives: (1) preventing jihadist organisations from securing support, sanctuary, or staging access for external operations, and (2) protecting Christian communities from targeted violence.[9]

Threat Definition

The most prominent feature of the strategy is its expanded and reordered definition of threat. It now broadens the concept of terrorism well beyond ideologically motivated violence to encompass transnational criminal organisations and domestic political movements. A second defining element is the hemisphere-first reorientation away from the traditional core of West and South Asia, placing narcoterrorism at the forefront of CT efforts. The Western Hemisphere becomes the primary theatre, with cartel-focused operations elevated above jihadist threats.

[7] Ibid., p. 10.

[8] Ibid., p. 12.

[9] Ibid., p. 13.

The strategy is also overtly political and combative in tone. The foreword and introduction[10] devote substantial space to criticising the Biden administration, including allegations of intelligence-community 'weaponisation', even as the document asserts that the new administration will exercise counterterrorism authorities 'apolitically'. The burden-sharing formulation also finds a place in the strategy with emphasis on "burden shifting" to European and African partners, along with a call to withdraw from overstretched American commitments.[11] Lastly, by classifying fentanyl as a threat equivalent to WMD, the strategy constructs a doctrinal bridge between counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism, elevating the fentanyl crisis to the highest tier of national-security and integrating it into the architecture of WMD prevention.

A Comparison with Previous Editions

The 2011 National Strategy for Counterterrorism[12] that came out under the leadership of President Obama was formulated around the threat of al-Qaeda and its affiliates. It emphasised adherence to the law of the land and American values, and the integration of countering violent extremism as a core pillar of prevention. The successive edition by the first Trump administration in 2018[13] retained the Sunni-Jihadist groups, Iranian terrorism and threats from Islamic states. Still, it broadened its scope to include transnational criminal organisations and domestic terrorism. It stressed pursuing terrorists 'at their source', and warned that without addressing the challenge of radicalisation and recruitment, the US would face a 'never-ending battle against terrorism'.[14]

The current edition diverges from these established strands, first by demoting the Islamists terrorism to second-order priority, and then by completely abandoning the counter-violent extremism and prevention paradigm framework. The current strategy does not engage with the issue of deradicalisation, and has introduced an explicit category on partisan threat with 'left-wing extremism'. The explicit omission of right-wing or radical-motivated violent extremism and groups like the Ku Klux Klan, which was earlier featured in the 2021 National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism, signals a shift in the Trump administration's approach.

[10] Ibid., p. 3.

[11] Ibid., p. 12.

[12] **"National Strategy for Counterterrorism"**, The White House, 2011.

[13] **"National Strategy for Counterterrorism of the United States of America"**, The White House, October 2018.

[14] Ibid., p. 21.

From a Critical Viewpoint

Despite covering a broad range of threats, the strategy is completely blind to the challenges posed by new-age technologies, including Artificial intelligence (AI), unmanned aerial systems (UAVs), cryptocurrency and cyber-attacks. Each of these technologies works as a force multiplier for threat actors. For instance, the strategy mentions the Houthis but ignores their biggest battlefield advantage: the use of low-cost UAVs against billion-dollar US naval assets.[15]

Likewise, there is growing use of cryptocurrency to evade sanctions and finance illicit networks, and of AI-generated content, deepfakes, voice cloning, and automated spear-phishing to conduct precision attacks against specific individuals through digital channels outside traditional military or financial systems—a shift that lets terrorist actors strike without ever crossing into the domains CT frameworks are built to monitor. None of these aspects is mentioned in a strategy which claims to address a 'changed'[16] threat environment. Similarly, the deliberate omission of right-wing extremism while including left-wing extremism as a threat contradicts the strategy's own insistence on not 'weaponising' CT power.

The strategy signals a shift in US discourse around threat and security, as it now sees them in hemispheric and homeland-centric terms. Sticking to its 'America First' agenda, it now looks at American overreach and demands burden-sharing across all domains.[17] Consequently, European and African partners will need to take greater responsibility for their own security.

For India and other nations in the Indo-Pacific, the downgrading of traditional jihadist threats is a cause for caution, given the direct implications these groups continue to pose for regional stability. Furthermore, the precedent of according non-ideological groups the same status as traditional terrorist organisations may significantly influence the way other states conceptualise, legislate and operationalise responses to transnational threats.

The 2026 US Counterterrorism Strategy is less incremental and more a doctrinal reconceptualisation. By reordering priorities and including new non-conventional threats within its ambit, it has done away with the consensus of the post-9/11 order. The long-term significance of this new approach will depend on whether the expansive threat taxonomy translates into operational realities, or remains only as a politically framed statement of intent.

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[15] Cole Black, **"The Houthi Model – Non-State Actors and Multi-Drone Capabilities"**, *Small Wars Journal*, 30 December 2025.

[16] **"US Counterterrorism Strategy"**, p. 5.

[17] Ibid., p. 12.

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