Strategy Session on Non-Kinetic Counterterrorism Tools: Statement for the Record

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Preventing terrorist attacks, from any place, by any actor, remains the FBI's top priority. The nature of the threat posed by terrorism—both domestic terrorism (DT) and international terrorism (IT)—continues to evolve.

The greatest terrorism threat to our Homeland is posed by lone actors or small cells who typically radicalize online and look to attack soft targets with easily accessible weapons. We see these threats manifested within both Domestic Violent Extremists (DVEs) and Homegrown Violent Extremists (HVEs), two distinct threats, both of which are located primarily in the United States. The FBI describes individuals who commit violent criminal acts in furtherance of social or political goals stemming from domestic influences—some of which include racial or ethnic bias, or anti-government or anti-authority sentiments—as DVEs, whereas HVEs are individuals who are inspired primarily by foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) but are not receiving individualized direction from these organizations.

Domestic and Homegrown Violent Extremists are often motivated and inspired by a mix of socio-political, ideological, and personal grievances against their targets, and continue to focus on accessible targets to include civilians, houses of worship, retail locations, and mass public gatherings. Selecting these types of soft targets, in addition to the insular nature of their radicalization and mobilization to violence and limited discussions with others regarding their plans, increases the challenge faced by law enforcement to detect and disrupt the activities of lone actors before they occur. Some violent extremists have also continued to target law enforcement and the military as well as symbols or members of the U.S. Government.

The top threats we face from DVEs are from those we categorize as Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists (REMVEs) and Anti-Government or Anti-Authority Violent Extremists. While REMVEs who advocate for the superiority of the white race were the primary source of lethal attacks perpetrated by DVEs in 2018 and 2019, Anti-Government or Anti-Authority Violent Extremists—specifically, Militia Violent Extremists and Anarchist Violent Extremists—were responsible for three of the four lethal DVE attacks in 2020. Notably, this included the first lethal attack committed by an Anarchist Violent Extremist in over 20 years.

Consistent with our mission, the FBI holds sacred the rights of individuals to peacefully exercise their First Amendment freedoms. Regardless of their specific ideology, the FBI will aggressively pursue those who seek to hijack legitimate First Amendment-protected activity by engaging in violent criminal activity such as the destruction of property and violent assaults on law enforcement officers. The FBI will actively pursue the opening of FBI investigations when an individual uses—or threatens the use of—force, violence, or coercion, in violation

of federal law and in the furtherance of social or political goals.

The FBI assesses HVEs are the greatest, most immediate IT threat to the Homeland. As I have described, HVEs are located in and radicalized primarily in the United States, are not receiving individualized direction from FTOs, but are inspired largely by the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) and al-Qaeda to commit violence. An HVE's lack of a direct connection with an FTO, ability to rapidly mobilize without detection, and frequent use of encrypted communications pose significant challenges to our ability to proactively identify and disrupt them.

The FBI remains concerned that FTOs, such as ISIS and al-Qaeda, intend to carry out or inspire large-scale attacks in the United States. Despite its loss of physical territory in Iraq and Syria, ISIS remains relentless in its campaign of violence against the United States and our partners—both here at home and overseas. ISIS continues to aggressively promote its hate-fueled rhetoric and attract like-minded violent extremists with a willingness to conduct attacks against the United States and our interests abroad. ISIS's successful use of social media and messaging applications to attract individuals seeking a sense of belonging is of continued concern to us. Like other foreign terrorist groups, ISIS advocates for lone offender attacks in the United States and Western countries via videos and other English language propaganda that have at times specifically advocated for attacks against civilians, the military, law enforcement and other government personnel.

Al-Qaeda maintains its desire to both conduct and inspire large-scale, spectacular attacks. Because continued pressure has degraded some of the group's senior leadership, in the near term, we assess al-Qaeda is more likely to continue to focus on cultivating its international affiliates and supporting small-scale, readily achievable attacks in regions such as East and West Africa. Over the past year, propaganda from al-Qaeda leaders continued to seek to inspire individuals to conduct attacks in the United States and other Western nations.

Iran and its global proxies and partners, including Iraqi Shia militant groups, continue to attack and plot against the United States and our allies throughout the Middle East in response to U.S. pressure. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) continues to provide support to militant resistance groups and terrorist organizations. Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran's primary strategic partner, has sent operatives to build terrorist infrastructures worldwide. Hezbollah also continues to conduct intelligence collection, financial activities, and procurement efforts worldwide to support its terrorist capabilities. FBI arrests in recent years of alleged Iranian and Hezbollah operatives in the United States suggest the Government of Iran and Hezbollah each seek to establish infrastructure here, potentially for the purpose of conducting contingency planning. IRGC-QF commander Esmail Qaani and Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah have each threatened retaliation for the death of IRGC-QF commander Qasem Soleimani.

As an organization, we continually adapt and rely heavily on the strength of our federal, state, local, tribal, territorial, and international partnerships to combat all terrorist threats to the United States and our interests. Our mission to mitigate terrorist attacks is further empowered by the private sector—they are essential to our understanding of the threat. Continued dialogue and working partnerships allow us to create trust, broaden the scope of the relationship, and deepen our commitment to working together. Ideally, we can create a flow of information that runs both ways. Most importantly, it helps us develop a level of trust and confidence to communicate when—or better yet—before the threat of a terrorist attack arises. Having that relationship in place in advance of an incident is key to mitigating the threat. To that end, we use all available lawful investigative techniques and methods to combat these threats while continuing to collect, analyze, and share intelligence concerning the threats posed by violent extremists, in all their forms, who desire to harm Americans and U.S. interests. We will continue to share intelligence and encourage the sharing of information among our numerous partners via our Joint Terrorism Task Forces across the country, and our Legal Attaché offices around the world.

The work being done by the FBI is demanding and we cannot afford to become complacent. We must continually seek out new technologies and solutions for the problems that exist today, as well as those that are on the horizon. We must build toward the future so that we are prepared to manage risk and deal with the threats we

will face at home and abroad by understanding how those threats may be connected. To that end, we gather intelligence, consistent with our authorities, to help us understand and prioritize identified threats, and to determine where there are gaps. We must stay ahead of the threats we face, working with our partners to try to close those gaps while continuing to learn as much as we can about the threats we face today, and those we may face tomorrow.