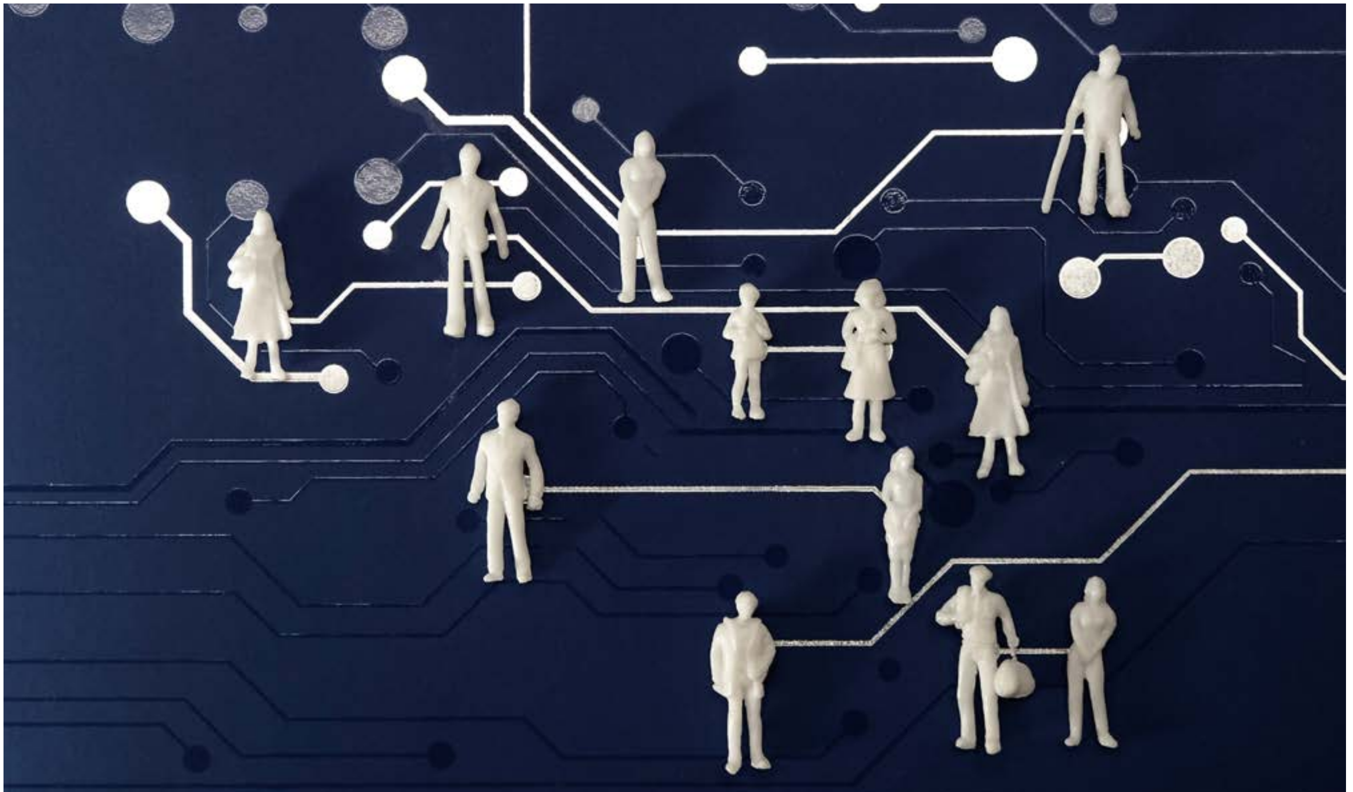

"Connecting the dots" became a catch phrase in the IC after 9/11, but the counterterrorism mission is also about understanding people, organizations, and networks, as symbolized by this image showing connections beween individual figures.

IRTPA and Counterterrorism: More Than Connecting the Dots

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Although the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act was motivated by many causes—the failure to assess correctly weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, long-standing coordination challenges between the Director of Central Intelligence and Defense Department intelligence elements, and a lack of coordination between domestic and foreign intelligence organizations—but most of all by the tragedy of September 11, 2001. As a result of these horrific terrorist attacks, political fury, intense lobbying by the victims' families, and a realization that the US Intelligence Community was far from optimized for the new terrorism threat, IRTPA adopted a range of initiatives to forge a new approach to counterterrorism—for the IC and beyond.

As with all such revolutionary steps some worked while others struggled. But undoubtedly,

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counterterrorism reform advanced by IRTPA changed how much of the US national security community—and those of our allies—approached the threat that manifested itself on 9/11. What follows is a reflection on both the Intelligence Community and some other key CT reforms that arose as a result of both 9/11 and IRTPA.

Perhaps no catchphrase better captured the motivating theme of counterterrorism reform post-9/11 than the IC's need to "connect the dots." This phrase—for better and for worse—animated much of the reform, because it:

- stressed the need to have a single organization that had access to "all" the intelligence related to terrorism threats;
- highlighted the imperative to reduce organizational boundaries between traditional law enforcement, foreign intelligence, and military intelligence;
- recognized the imperative for a consolidated watchlist that sought to identify all known and suspected terrorists, and that this list be shared comprehensively across varied parts of the US government;
- recognized that the aforementioned efforts needed to be enabled by a more broadly integrated, "joint" counterterrorism-intelligence workforce.

Flagship Reform

If there was a flagship post-9/11 IC terrorism reform, it was the creation of the National Counterterrorism Center. To say congressional authors viewed the NCTC as the centerpiece of reform would be an understatement; I cannot count the number of times Senators Collins and Lieberman proudly proclaimed—appropriately so—to me that they were NCTC's mother and father. NCTC was a hard-wired, organizational solution to the first identified failure of 9/11: no department or agency had all the authority and access it needed to understand fully transnational terrorism threats.

To further stress the significance of NCTC, Congress authorized the NCTC director not only to be Senate-confirmed, but also (admittedly, a very "inside the Beltway" metric of importance) to be Executive Level II—a deputy-secretary equivalent and equal in rank to the CIA director.

Critically, the creation of NCTC was not truly of whole cloth, as pre-IRTPA George Tenet had—in conjunction with the FBI, Defense Department, and National Security Council—created the Terrorist Threat Integration Center. TTIC, which was led by John Brennan, sat within the CIA but included an interagency flavor and had interagency responsibilities, to include modernizing the interagency watchlist (more on this later). But as much as TTIC advanced the notion of counterterrorism collaboration, it was viewed by many as a CIA institution and its fight for relevancy—most notably with CIA's own Counterterrorism Center—were things of bureaucratic legend. Having spoken with Brennan and Jose Rodriguez (then head of CTC) pre-IRTPA, it was readily apparent that as well-intended as the creation of TTIC was, it had done little to solve many of the interagency rivalries that had plagued the IC before 9/11.[a]

Thus, the creation of NCTC was truly groundbreaking, even with its imperfections. To create a new, interagency, mission-focused entity provided enormous opportunity for improvement while of course not putting to rest many of the decades-old interagency rivalries and imperfect allocation of resources across a distributed counterterrorism enterprise.

When I became NCTC's principal deputy director and later its second Senate-confirmed director, NCTC was on the path to becoming an increasingly robust counterterrorism presence. With 300-plus

a. See an interview with then-TTIC Director John Brennan in *Studies in Intelligence*, 48, No. 4 (December 2004). Lightly redacted, it was declassified and released in 2014; see https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005618307.pdf

analysts looking at almost every aspect of global terrorism, chairing secure video teleconferences three times a day for the entirety of the CT community, a 24/7 operations center tracking global threats, and responsibility for maintaining the IC's classified watchlist of known and suspected terrorists, NCTC was a far cry from the early days of a resource-limited TTIC. And with significant cadres of interagency personnel—most notably almost half of all staff coming from the CIA—NCTC's expertise and connective tissue to the most far-flung corners of the CT enterprise was unmatched.

During its early years there were real successes from NCTC. These included:

- coordinating responses to numerous threats in the United States and abroad;
- authoring an increasing number of articles for the President's Daily Brief;
- creating joint counterterrorism products for state and local officials;
- managing and modernizing the watchlist to enable unmatched situational awareness.

All that being said, old habits and rivalries did not magically vanish with IRTPA's passage.

NCTC's Challenges

First, the tug-of-war between NCTC and CTC was—to put it politely—often a running gun battle. Who would write the PDB on the latest threat? Why were resources not allocated in a more coordinated manner? Shouldn't someone other than those supporting operations provide alternative analysis of a particular issue? In truth, too many people were often focused on high-profile work, like tracking al-Qa'ida senior leadership and writing for the PDB, and not enough were spending time on the mundane but likely more significant.

We almost tragically learned this on Christmas Day 2009 when a Yemeni-trained terrorist tried to blow up a plane bound for Detroit. To be clear, although the NCTC-CTC fights were most common, similar challenges existed across the counterterrorism community, given NCTC's new and broad statutory mission. Fully implemented and during a time of enormous resource growth, NCTC was often seen as a threat to others' traditional missions and resources.

Second, although NCTC gained remarkable access to intelligence and certainly had more than any other agency, certain "crown jewels"—whether CIA operational reporting or FBI case information—could be much harder to come by. Some of this was protected for excellent and worth security reasons; some was not.

Third, it took years to help others in the interagency understand why just tracking the latest plot wasn't enough to "solve" the CT challenge we faced. It was absolutely necessary, but not sufficient. Thus, while early in NCTC's life we created what was undoubtedly the preeminent analytic unit on radicalization and extremist messaging, we were for many years speaking into a bit of a policy vacuum. Intelligence analysis is critical but just because one had created NCTC and new capabilities didn't mean that the US government more broadly was well-positioned to action truly outstanding analytic work.

Finally, as a result of IRTPA, NCTC's work was limited to foreign terrorism. This was largely necessitated by a mix of legitimate civil-liberties concerns animating IRTPA's empowerment of the IC, but also in part—at least from my semi-biased perspective—by the FBI being extremely protective of its domestic turf. With the rapid growth of the internet and associated borderless radicalization, what was international and what was purely domestic terrorism? With the rise of other forms of terrorism since 9/11, these rather artificial divisions in a world of ambiguity have continued to cause organizational and legal angst.

NCTC as a Bridge

NCTC served an important role in reducing friction between law enforcement, military intelligence, foreign intelligence, and domestic intelligence, but this IRTPA-driven effort was much broader than any single organization. In the post-9/11 world, rapidly accelerated by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the integration of these previously distinct realms became critical to virtually all counterterrorism. The successes of such integration are truly eye-watering, including rapid exploitation intelligence to drive follow on military and law enforcement operations; leveraging of military-collected biometrics for broader counterterrorism screening; and leveraging law enforcement expertise in military theaters to enable follow on criminal prosecutions.

Another revolution of IRTPA was the statutory requirement to create a "central and shared knowledge bank on known and suspected terrorists and international terror groups," which was to be managed by NCTC. To appreciate fully how revolutionary this is, remember that at least one part of the IC's pre-9/11 watchlist was literally a set of index cards. With IRTPA came NCTC's creation of the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment (TIDE), which in conjunction with the broader Intelligence Community's collection and analytic efforts, became a names-based (and increasingly a biometric-linked) compilation that was as comprehensive as possible. Equally if not more important, TIDE—which contains classified intelligence—was (and remains) linked to the FBI's Terrorist Screening Data Base, which in turn provides unclassified screening for State Department consular affairs, DHS's border and travel screening, and—quite incredibly considering the complexities of managing tearlines and the like—any police officer in the country who screens an individual against national law enforcement databases.

Needless to say and no different from the other reforms, watchlisting has had remarkable successes and high-profile failures, and it raised very real civil-liberties issues. The successes are rarely mentioned, but the watchlist has undeniably helped identify terrorist travel, more recently revolutionized and streamlined visa reviews, and led to quite incredible operational success from intelligence insights. But as with other names-based systems, the watchlist can lead to (especially in its early days) misidentifications or failure to identify real threats—as was the case for the Christmas Day bomber of 2009—based on a combination of fragmentary intelligence, aged and inadequate State Department information systems, and political pressure at the time not to prohibit all those listed from being able to travel to the United States.[a] Finally, the watchlist continues to be a powerful example of the challenges facing the IC in a world of massively expanding data; both identifying the needles as well as making sure one isn't hindering innocent individuals via watchlisting remains an enormous resource and policy challenge today.

Making Jointness Routine

Finally, for the IC—and in particularly the counterterrorism community—IRTPA ushered in an era of jointness that most now consider de rigueur. I for one, perhaps unlike the other reforms, cannot identify any negative, unintended consequences of what jointness provided to the counterterrorism workforce. The highest profile of these successes is undoubtedly the incredible joint effort that led to the death of Usama bin Ladin. At every stage, an integrated, joint IC leveraged a variety of capabilities to locate bin Ladin, and ultimately that integration and jointness continued with the operational execution of the mission. It was jointness at its counterterrorism best.

But jointness is also about the everyday. Perhaps it is merely

a. On December 25, 2009, AQAP operative Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab attempted to detonate a nonmetallic bomb on Northwest Airlines Flight 253, which was traveling with 289 passengers from Amsterdam to Detroit.

pining for the past, but I very vividly remember my Friday threat briefings at NCTC, where I collected an increasingly large group to walk through all the most significant threats we saw across the globe. Although these briefings started quite small, to talk about the most sensitive operations, we expanded them because so much was going on. By the end, we would jam some 80 officers into a conference room not just to brief me, but to see who else—from their own organizational and personal perspective—had new ideas to pull intelligence threads. One week it might be an FBI analyst who noted that the Bureau might have information on a suspect, and the next week it could be an analyst from NGA who knew of a special collection method. The circle expanded widely, to include entities like the Coast Guard, major police departments, and countless others. And almost every week that jointness brought an insight that we might otherwise never have gained.

Strategic Operational Planning

As much as these reforms changed how CT intelligence worked post-9/11, there was a grander vision for counterterrorism coordination beyond the Intelligence Community in IRTPA. This effort, termed Strategic Operational Planning (SOP), was the NCTC director's statutory responsibility, and given that it extended beyond the IC, in this role the director of NCTC—to virtually everyone's chagrin—reported directly to the president. Even those new to a bureaucracy will quickly appreciate the challenges!

The basic idea behind SOP was to have a government-wide coordinator on counterterrorism once a threat or threats were identified. The idea largely originated with the 9/11 Commission, which noted that before 9/11, when one "declared war" on al-Qa'ida, it wasn't actually clear if anyone was in charge or if resources and operations shifted to the new imperative. Thus, entered strategic operational planning.

What in theory was a clear mandate was in practice vastly more challenging. In different administrations (and with different NCTC directors) the term has meant many different things. Initially, NCTC compiled a detailed and lengthy high-level operational summary of what all of the ways in which the US government would counter terrorism. Comprehensive as it was, it wasn't clear to many how much it actually changed behavior as opposed to simply compiling what was.

With time, SOP became far more tactical, and famous (or infamous?) for "horse blanket" graphics that provided deputies and principals a series of options for a variety of tactical threats and broader strategic campaigns, organized by region, terrorist group, or themes such as radicalization and weapons of mass destruction. Critically, these efforts needed NSC blessing, to allow for the deep dive that NCTC officers did with their interagency colleagues going well beyond the IC. In some instances, these efforts led to rather embarrassing results as they sometimes illustrated that perhaps a department or agency's rhetorical efforts were vastly more robust than the minimal resources that their budgets actually reflected that they had dedicated to the mission at hand.

Measuring SOP's impact was and is tricky, and I admit significant bias on this front, but it is quite clear that it represents a novel and important approach to more effective and efficient government. In this regard, it is the mission-focused equivalent of the entirety of the DNI—no absolute authority to control departments and agencies but at least an effort to optimize the US government's efforts in a sprawling bureaucracy and mission area. Counterterrorism SOP remains one of the few mission-focused coordinators anywhere in the US government and arguably, given both the frequency with which missions extend well beyond a single department and the clear inability of the NSC to perform this function, it is an area that deserves far greater attention.

Looking Ahead

Arguably, in an era of decreasing policy and intelligence focus on terrorism, NCTC may actually become more rather than less important. During my time leading NCTC, the flow of resources to counterterrorism was virtually never ending. In today's radically more resource-constrained environment, there is a clear need to maintain vigilance. To do so, we will need to be vastly more efficient. NCTC might well help provide more global coverage of lasting, new, and emerging threats by rationalizing increasingly scarce resources. Failure to do so risks replaying a movie we have all seen before as priorities shift, and in the world of counterterrorism the movie does not end well.

One area in which this is particularly true is some increasing political resistance to NCTC assisting on domestic terrorism. Although IRTPA is clear that NCTC shall not independently lead domestic terrorism efforts, it also specifically provides for NCTC to assist in such efforts. From my vantage, as the line between "international" and "domestic" is increasingly blurred, we should not shun NCTC from this vital role. NCTC's information, understanding, and ability to break down unproductive institutional boundaries has value beyond purely international terrorism and—as long as the proper legal and civil liberties protections are in place (as I believe they are at NCTC)—we are only hurting ourselves by narrowing the institution's role.

Finally, although the political appetite that existed post-9/11 to radically reform government institutions significantly dissipated over the past two decades, this may well be changing, and for those of us who believe in NCTC's successes, even if imperfect, there is value in evaluating what other missions need an NCTC analogue. Despite the fact that few real-world problems align neatly to a single department's authorities, we continue to try to solve problems using centuries-old organizational constructs. Moreover, as the size and complexity of the US government increases, we continue to rely on what is a rather tiny White House staff to coordinate among agencies in a way that can never truly create an integrated operational effort—let alone create integrated planning, budgeting, and capabilities. From this perspective, what is most surprising is the operational successes we achieve in spite of our organizational dysfunction.

On IRTPA's 20th anniversary, it is easy to forget how much has changed since September 10, 2001. The day before 9/11, some jointness, coordination, and collaboration existed, of course—but not nearly enough to detect and dusrupt the hijackers. While IRTPA's reforms were far from perfect, and the post-9/11 environment brought about some degree of improvement without the statutory earthquake, the reforms were an absolutely critical step in creating the organizations and environment necessary for the IC and the broader CT community to find the successes it has over the past two decades. As many often note, we are not perfectly safe (from terrorism or any other man-made or natural threat) but we are markedly safer from the scourge of terrorism because of IRTPA's success—and the success of all those who have worked in counterterrorism since 9/11. ■