

****A REPORT FOR THE U.S. ARMY'S TRANSFORMATION AND TRAINING COMMAND (T2COM)**:**

**AN ERA OF HYBRID COLLUSION:
A THREAT ASSESSMENT OF
INTERNATIONAL VIOLENT NON-STATE ACTORS
(VNSAs)
AND STATE ACTORS
TO THE UNITED STATES**



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Executive Summary

As of August 2025, the United States faces a hybrid threat environment centered on the evolving danger of violent non-state actors (VNSAs) and their increasing cooperation with state adversaries, raising the overall risk to the U.S. homeland. The most serious danger is not any one terrorist organization, cartel, militia, or state power, but the system they create together. This report examines and assesses the threat posed by twenty international VNSAs—using major state powers as strategic benchmarks for comparison—and analyzes how the convergence between the two groups is altering and confounding the U.S. Government (USG) threat landscape. Over the last 30-plus years, the threat from international VNSAs has monopolized the operational environment and dictated policy and engagement. However, as of 2025, this has shifted. This report, conducted as a consultancy project by Pennsylvania State University graduate students for the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC)—which has, as of October 2025, become the U.S. Army’s Transformation and Training Command (T2COM)—is an independent academic assessment rather than an official T2COM product. It aims to address core questions such as: How does the USG view the threats posed in this contemporary ecosystem of violent non-state actors, such as Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs), Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs), and Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs), relative to strategic competition with traditional state actors? Which VNSAs present the greatest threat to the U.S. homeland? What emerging trends or affiliations can be identified with VNSAs and state actors?

This assessment applies a standardized Will and Capability framework, which ranks the will and capability of international VNSAs and states to attack the U.S. homeland. Using a 0-10 scale on both metrics and multiplying the two values together produces an Overall Threat Score (0–100) for each international VNSA and state. These findings are then organized by Combatant Command to align with U.S. Army planning and resourcing rhythms. The results show a clear hierarchy across both state and non-state actors (see Figure 1). By incorporating state actors primarily as a comparative baseline, the analysis highlights that while states generally score higher on Capability metrics and often rely on proxies and cyber tools rather than direct kinetic action, numerous VNSAs sustain strong Will metrics and exploit global networks, safe havens, and ideological reach. The headline picture is convergence: Iran’s continued support to proxies, alleged links between Chinese criminal networks and cartels, and the broad investment by all four major state adversaries—China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea (or CRINK)—in information and cyber operations combine to strain U.S. defenses below the threshold of open conflict. This report finds the following:

- **Ideologically Centered VNSAs Maintain the Strongest Will:** Variation in Will scores by international VNSAs is closely tied to ideological alignment. The core Salafi-jihadist groups, namely the Al-Qaeda Core and Islamic State - Central, demonstrate a sustained and uncompromising adherence to extremist ideologies and objectives, thus representing the two highest Will scores in our analysis of VNSAs. Decentralized nodes of the core groups—international affiliates or provinces of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State—display lower Will scores to attack the U.S. homeland than the core “parent” groups. This can be attributed to these international affiliates’ preoccupation with local politics, including clashes with local security forces, local civilian resistance, territorial challenges, power vacuums, and struggles that diverge from “parent” groups’ ideological motivations.

- **Regional VNSA Threat Patterns Vary by Combatant Command:** Of the three Combatant Commands investigated, CENTCOM presents the highest overall VNSA risk, driven by dense Salafi-jihadist activity and persistent Iranian enablement. NORTHCOM/SOUTHCOM poses the most immediate danger to the homeland through cross-border cartel operations and illicit trade. AFRICOM presents the lowest direct homeland risk, though expanding Chinese and Russian influence warrants continued monitoring.
- **State Actors, Not VNSAs, Rank Highest in Overall Threat Score:** Despite this report's focus on the threats posed to the U.S. homeland by international VNSAs, it finds that overall, state actors, not VNSAs, exhibit the highest Overall Threat Scores. North Korea holds the top Overall Threat Score (84), driven by entrenched anti-U.S. ideology and advanced nuclear and cyber programs. China (80) and Russia (76.7) follow closely, reflecting extensive global reach and multidomain capabilities, but with lower desires to kinetically engage the U.S. Iran ranks lower (56.2) but remains pernicious due to its sponsorship of proxies that elevate the capabilities of groups such as Hezbollah and the Houthis.
- **Hybrid Cooperation Defines the Global Threat Environment:** The contemporary international threat landscape is no longer shaped by isolated actors working alone, but rather, by a multiplicity of U.S. adversaries — both VNSAs and states — cooperating in various domains and to differing degrees. Sustaining decisive United States readiness for large-scale combat must be paired with persistent, integrated competition against proxies, facilitators, and cyber actors that collectively erode U.S. security below the level of open warfare.
- **NORTHCOM/SOUTHCOM VSNAs Expose a Structural Anomaly in Threat Scoring:** The generally low rankings of Overall Threat that this report ascribes to VNSAs from the NORTHCOM/SOUTHCOM region belie the reality of the threats that they pose to the U.S. homeland. At its core, this is because the region's unique threat landscape confounds the standard Will and Capability calculus used by this report. Despite causing the most aggregate damage to the United States, these groups rank artificially low because they lack traditional *ideological* hostility. Instead of viewing the United States as a political enemy, they view it as a market for exploitation. This distinction underscores the discrepancy between economically motivated groups and ideologically driven insurgents, exemplifying the complexities of the contemporary threat landscape and the challenge of creating a holistic Will and Capability taxonomy.

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Introduction

As of this writing in August 2025, the threat to the United States from international VNSAs is real and intensifying. For this report, a VNSA is defined as “a nonsovereign entity that exercises significant political power and territorial control; is outside the control of a sovereign government; and [which] often employs violence in pursuit of its objectives.” Such entities can include FTOs, VEOs, and TCOs.¹ While international VNSAs have long been a concern for the United States, the challenges they now present in the contemporary international operational environment (OE) are compounded by the growing cooperation *between* FTOs, VEOs, and TCOs, as well as international VNSAs’ collaborations with traditional state actors. Collectively, this convergence creates a more complex, multifaceted, and asymmetrical threat environment than ever before. The most prominent examples of this state and non-state actor collusion include Iran’s coordination and longstanding support and backing of terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis, and Latin American cartels’ growing partnerships with China-based chemical companies that supply the raw chemicals used in the production of synthetic drugs.^{2,3} This emerging synergy among VNSAs and state actors presents several challenges for the USG. It raises critical questions, outlined in the Executive Summary, regarding how the government perceives, prioritizes, and responds to these evolving hybrid threats.

As the historical overview in Figure 2 illustrates, from 2001 until 2018, FTOs and VEOs like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State dominated the U.S. Government’s OE outlook and defined its national security priorities and efforts. However, global dynamics have since shifted. With the rise in threats posed by more traditional statist actors, namely China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, and emerging threats and influence from transnational criminal organizations such as the Sinaloa Cartel and MS-13, many observers, until recently, believed that the era of U.S. concern with transnational jihadist terrorism had subsided, or even ended. Yet, current evidence suggests otherwise. The January 2025 Islamic State-inspired attack in New Orleans, ISKP’s continued assaults in Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, ongoing U.S. Special Forces operations in Somalia against Al-Shabaab, and the escalating violence of cartels in Central and South America all underscore that threats from international VNSAs are far from gone.^{4, 5, 6, 7}

¹Definitions, U.S. Code 22 (2023), § 6402. <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/USCODE-2023-title22/USCODE-2023-title22-chap73-sec6402>.

²The World Factbook. “Iran.” Central Intelligence Agency, July 21, 2025. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/iran/>.

³U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, National Drug Threat Assessment 2024 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, May 2024), accessed August 12, 2025, https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2024-05/NDTA_2024.pdf.

⁴Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), *Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney, Australia: IEP, March 2025), accessed August 12, 2025, PDF, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2025.pdf>.

⁵Palmer, Alexander, Riley McCabe, Daniel Byman, and Skyeler Jackson. “Global Terrorism Threat Assessment 2025.” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2025.

⁶Lopez, C. Todd. “U.S. to Resume Small, Persistent Presence in Somalia.” U.S. Department of Defense, March 16, 2022. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3033345/us-to-resume-small-persistent-presence-in-somalia/>.

⁷Council on Foreign Relations Global Conflict Tracker. “Criminal Violence in Mexico.” June 11, 2025. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/criminal-violence-mexico>.

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Research Questions

In May 2025, senior leaders of T2COM's predecessor organization, TRADOC, posed the following questions to PSU graduate student analysts, which now serve as the core concerns of this report:

- How, as of mid-2025, does the U.S. Government view the threats posed by the ecosystem of international VNSAs, including FTOs, VEOs, and TCOs, in a contemporary era shaped by strategic competition with state actors?
- How have more than three decades of experience, from the post-Cold War era through the Global War on Terror and its aftermath, informed the USG's current understanding of these actors?
- Which VNSAs present the greatest overall threat to the U.S. homeland, and how do they compare in terms of their Will and Capability to inflict harm?
- To what extent are regional trends or affiliations among FTOs, VEOs, TCOs, and state actors visible and influential in shaping the global threat landscape?
- How do the threats posed by VNSAs compare to those posed by state actors, specifically China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea (CRINK)?

⁸"About – U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command." Accessed July 27, 2025.
<https://www.T2COM.army.mil/about/>.

Main Report Theses

After the September 11th, 2001, attacks, the USG prioritized combating and dismantling terrorist organizations abroad, preventing another attack on U.S. soil, and generally addressing the threat posed by VNSAs to protect the U.S. homeland. However, this prolonged fixation on international VNSAs gave rise to increased capabilities from state actors, like China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, who expanded their global influence and presence through proxy conflicts, cyber capabilities, and increased collaboration with non-state actors. This shift has resulted in the emergence of the hybrid threat environment in which the United States now operates. In this landscape, the USG can no longer afford to focus solely on VNSAs or state actors alone, but rather, must now balance the multidimensional and integrated threats it now faces.

- **An Irregular Mix of State and Non-State Actor Threats:** A threat landscape once dominated by FTOs has become increasingly multifaceted with the presence of state actors and TCOs, in addition to new FTOs and VEOs, posing a novel and unprecedented risk to the United States.
- **Unprecedented Convergence of VNSAs and State Actors:** As of August 2025, the USG threat landscape is marked by the emergence of hybrid threats: the convergence of and rapidly increasing cooperation between state actors and non-state actors, i.e., FTOs, TCOs, VEOs.
- **Hybrid Adversaries Demand Strategic Approaches:** The USG faces heightened strategic complexity and global volatility due to the emerging hybrid threat environment, demanding innovative and integrated approaches and responses, rather than siloed defense strategies.

Methodology & Terms

This report was generated by a cohort of twelve graduate students within Pennsylvania State University's Homeland Security graduate program during the summer of 2025. It was led by Dr. Jason Warner in collaboration with TRADOC, which has since transitioned to become T2COM. Graduate students with professional backgrounds in the Department of Homeland Security, Customs and Border Patrol, the Army Corps of Engineers, active duty military, Department of Defense/War contractors, intelligence community professionals and analysts, and beyond, participated in this semester-long practicum.

Over fourteen weeks, graduate student analysts engaged in rigorous quantitative and qualitative research, examining historical case studies and conducting in-depth open-source investigations to generate comprehensive threat assessments on various international VNSAs, including FTOs, VEOs, TCOs, as well as state actors. Analysts examined and generated threat assessments on twenty groups and actors: IS West Africa Province (ISWAP), Al-Shabaab, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), Islamic State - Sahel Province (ISSP), Ansar Allah (Houthis), Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Hezbollah, Islamic State Core (Islamic State - Central), the Taliban, IS Khorasan Province (ISKP), Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Al-Qaeda Core, Cartel de Sinaloa, Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generacion, Tren de Aragua, Mara

Salvatrucha (MS-13), as well as Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran. Student analyses and reports were generated using open-source practices, utilizing U.S.-based and global news outlet articles, scholarly journals, government publications, presidential directives and executive orders, think tank reports, and historical documents. Students utilized sources such as the 9/11 Commission Report, the Global Terrorism Threat Assessment, the Department of War's National Security Strategy, the Department of Homeland Security's Quadrennial Homeland Security Review, as well as publications from institutions like The Council on Foreign Relations, U.S. Military Academy at West Point, the Congressional Research Service, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Institute for Economics and Peace. They relied on global news outlets such as *NPR*, *BBC*, and *Reuters*. Each threat assessment was subject to detailed scrutiny and peer review for analytical depth, accuracy, and completeness. Each VNSA and state threat assessment produced by this cohort was subsequently used to generate the report's overall findings and analysis. This report defines the term 'violent non-state actor' in a manner inclusive of and referencing all three categorized groups: foreign terrorist organizations, violent extremist organizations, and transnational criminal organizations. State actors include China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea.

For this report, and in order to accurately assess the threat posed by VNSAs and state actors in this contemporary period, this student cohort developed a scaled metric system (Figure 3) used to generate and apply an Overall Threat Score for each of the sixteen assessed VNSAs and four state actors. The Overall Threat Score for each VNSA and state actor was derived through an analytical process that evaluated and compared two key factors: Will and Capability.

- **The Will Score** was calculated based on the group's perceived intent or desire to carry out an attack on the U.S. homeland. The factors driving this score included the group's ideological, strategic, or political motivations; anti-U.S. sentiment; historical grievances; and publicly expressed hostility. This score was assigned between zero and ten (0–10), with zero being the lowest and ten being the highest.
- **The Capability Score** was determined based on the group's operational capacity to execute an attack on the U.S. homeland. This score evaluated factors such as financial resources, arms inventory and acquisition, technological or cyber capabilities, technical cadre, and the organization's overall sophistication and network strength. This score was assigned between zero and ten (0–10), with zero being the lowest and ten being the highest.
- **The Overall Threat Score** was calculated by multiplying the Capability and Will Scores on a scale from zero to one hundred (0–100). Higher numbers indicate a greater overall danger to the U.S. homeland. Each group was scored independently by multiple analysts, and results were compared to ensure the ratings were consistent and objective. While this approach provides a systematic and transparent way to assess and compare threat levels across terrorist organizations, transnational criminal networks, and state actors, it also carries limitations, chiefly that no single metric can capture the full complexity of rapidly evolving hybrid threats.

Layout of Report

This report is organized into four sections. The first section examines the contemporary international threat landscape through a comparative analysis of sixteen VNSAs geographically dispersed across the four regions aligned with U.S. Department of War Combatant Commands:

AFRICOM, CENTCOM 1, CENTCOM 2, and NORTHCOM/SOUTHCOM. Each actor's Overall Threat Score, derived from its Will and Capability ratings, provides a consistent metric for assessing and comparing threat levels.

The second section analyzes the distinct challenges and threats posed by state actors, including China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, through the same threat metric system applied to VNSAs.

The third section examines the relationships between states and VNSAs and assesses how state-VNSA collaboration amplifies the broader hybrid threat environment.

The final section summarizes the report's principal findings, outlines implications for the United States Army and broader defense planning and acknowledges key methodological limitations while identifying areas for future research.

Figure 1:
Mapping the Threat Environment - Overall Threat Scores of International VNSAs and State Actors

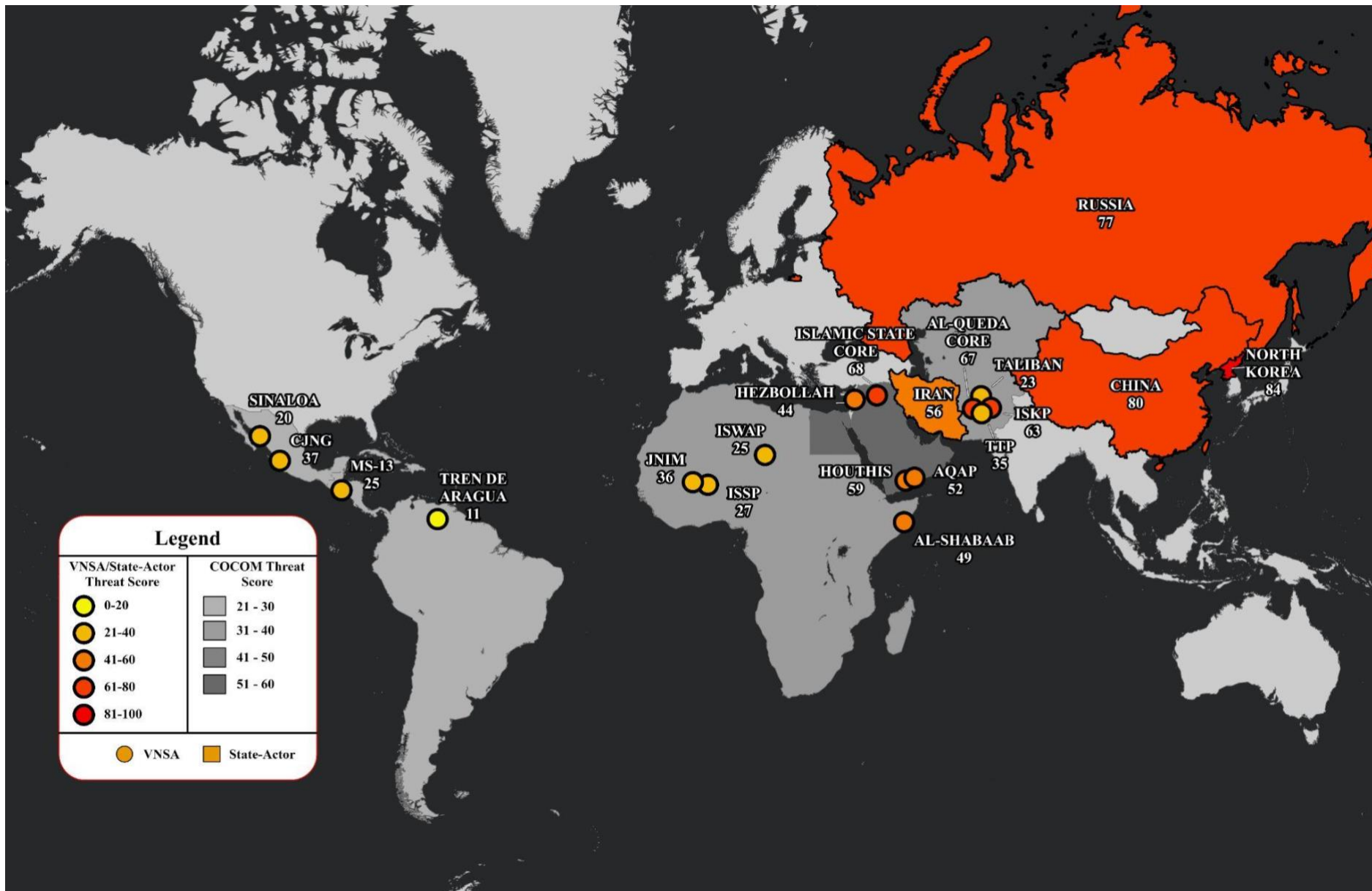


Figure 2:
Key Takeaways of the USG's Threat Perceptions of International VNSAs, 1990 - 2025

Era	Primary Time Period	USG Threat Perspective	VNSA Threat Landscape	USG Policy & Posture	USG Responses
Pre-9/11 & The National Security Threat Environment	1990-2001	VNSAs treated as case specific threats Greatest threats are the spread of conventional arms, ballistic missiles, and WMDs	A shift away from Cold War superpower rivalry AQ's attacks on U.S. embassies and military assets abroad	Concern over WMD proliferation	First Gulf War Operation Infinite Reach Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I)
Taliban and Al-Qaeda Wars	2001-2008	Islamist terrorism viewed as USG's primary threat due to 9/11 attacks	AQ is the main VNSA threat due to mass casualty event on the U.S. homeland	Creation of DHS Escalation and acceleration of GWOT	Operation Enduring Freedom Operation Iraqi Freedom USA PATRIOT Act of 2001 Homeland Security Act
Global Jihadist Flux & COIN	2008-2014	Balance ongoing war effort with further decentralization and globalization of VNSAs	AQ increased globalization efforts, propaganda campaigns, and recruitment leading to influx in AQ affiliates	GWOT Maintenance	Counterinsurgency efforts Afghanistan War Operation New Dawn Operation Neptune Spear
Islamic State - Central Era Disruption	2014-2018	Islamic State - Central viewed as a "Hybrid Threat" Inter-State Strategic competition viewed as growing threat	Islamic State - Central declared a caliphate and inspired lone-wolf attacks AQ and affiliates remain salient due to exploitation of regional instability	Salafi Jihadist VNSAs pose persistent threat USG begins reposturing towards State Actor threats	Operation Inherent Resolve Operation Freedom's Sentinel
Hybrid Competition	2018-2024	Inter-State Strategic competition becomes primary national security concern	Islamic State - Central and AQ affiliates demonstrate regional lethality DVEs pose major threat to the homeland	Disrupt AQ and Islamic State - Central's desire for WMD proliferation Mitigate DVEs through counter-radicalization	2021 National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve
VNSA Convergence	2025	Near-Peer competitors are the primary threat VNSAs understood as VEOs (includes FTOs, HVEs, and DVEs) and TCOs Concern over growing intersection between TCOs and VEOs	ISKP and AQ increase globalization TCOs drug production and trafficking increases risk to U.S. homeland HVEs self-radicalization capabilities increase	Diffuse threat of TCOs, FTOs, HVEs, and State Actors requires USG to counter each singular threat while mitigating a growing convergence	Executive Order 14157 Executive Order 14161 Operation Take Back America Directive to use military force against TCOs

Figure 3:
Report Scoring Metrics For “Will” and “Capability” to Harm the U.S. Homeland

Will for Anti-U.S. Action		Capability for Anti-U.S. Action	
10	Maximum Hostility Declares war on U.S.; unlimited, incl. mass casualty attacks.	10	Maximum Capability WMD-level; catastrophic homeland attacks possible.
9	Extreme Willingness Intense intent; actively threatens/ attacks, slightly less ‘no limits’.	9	Near-Catastrophic Global reach; mass-casualty or infrastructure attacks short of WMD.
8	Very High Will Strong hostility; frequent rhetoric, U.S. is a major but not sole target.	8	Very High Capability Large-scale ops; hundreds of casualties, strong transnational network.
7	High Will Openly hostile; will strike when feasible, not always priority.	7	High Capability Significant ability; dozens killed in attacks, regional reach, some cyber.
6	Moderate-High Will Anti-U.S. sentiment; attacks likely if provoked.	6	Moderate-High Capability Can execute mid-scale regional attacks; limited international reach.
5	Moderate/Neutral Mixed stance; mostly local focus, occasional anti-U.S. rhetoric.	5	Moderate Capability Opportunistic violence; small/ mid-level attacks abroad.
4	Low-Level Hostility Minor hostility; little direct U.S. targeting.	4	Low-Moderate Limited reach; basic weapons, minor local attacks only.
3	Minimal Hostile Intent Little desire; violence incidental/ self-defense.	3	Low Capability Small scale, poorly resourced; incidental U.S. threat.
2	Negligible Will Almost no intent; avoids U.S., hostility is rare.	2	Very Low Capability Scant resources; minimal violence, not a U.S. threat.
1	Essentially No Will No intent; entirely local focus.	1	Practically No Capability No real ability; small or decimated groups.
0	No Hostility Neutral or cooperative; no threats, may align with U.S.	0	No Capability Defunct/ non-violent; zero operational ability.

Section One

Contemporary VNSA Threat Assessment

Introduction

Understanding the contemporary threat landscape that international VNSAs pose to the United States is the core concern of this report. This section aims to provide a concise, yet comprehensive summary of the contemporary threat landscape faced by the U.S. homeland as of August 2025. The subsequent analysis offers a clear and structured assessment of the threat environment as well as an indication of how these threats will continue to evolve.

In this section, we seek to answer **three** main research questions:

Research Questions

- As of mid-2025, which international VNSAs pose the greatest threat to the U.S. homeland?
- How do these international VNSAs compare in terms of their Will and Capability to harm the United States?
- To what extent are regional dynamics or affiliation patterns (e.g., with AQ or IS) shaping these threats?

Methodology

In this section, we discuss the threats posed by sixteen major international VNSAs, broken down into four distinct regions of the world (Africa, Middle East, South Asia, and Latin America). These VNSAs provide a comprehensive sample of the international VNSA threat landscape in every region, but by no means represent a complete picture of *all* VNSAs that pose risks for the United States. Each VNSA was selected because it represented a prominent threat relative to other groups in the region. In other words, examining these VNSAs' historical trajectories enabled us to identify which groups were most likely to threaten the United States as of August 2025, based on recurring behaviors and strategic developments.

The findings in this section are based on the collection and analysis of open-source intelligence by twelve analysts between May and August 2025. Each analyst scored their assigned groups based on two major factors: Will and Capability to attack the U.S. homeland. These scores were then multiplied together to calculate an Overall Threat Score per group. Said scores were then averaged out amongst analysts to reduce any biases that may be introduced by an individual's academic and/or professional background. In order to maintain analytical rigor, each analyst assigned their threat scores based on detailed scoring guidelines (see Appendix A) that were broken down on a scale of 0-10.

This threat assessment is organized by geographic region in alignment with U.S. Combatant Commands (COCOMs). We adopted this structure to mirror the operational framework of the Department of War and facilitate integration with Army planning and resource

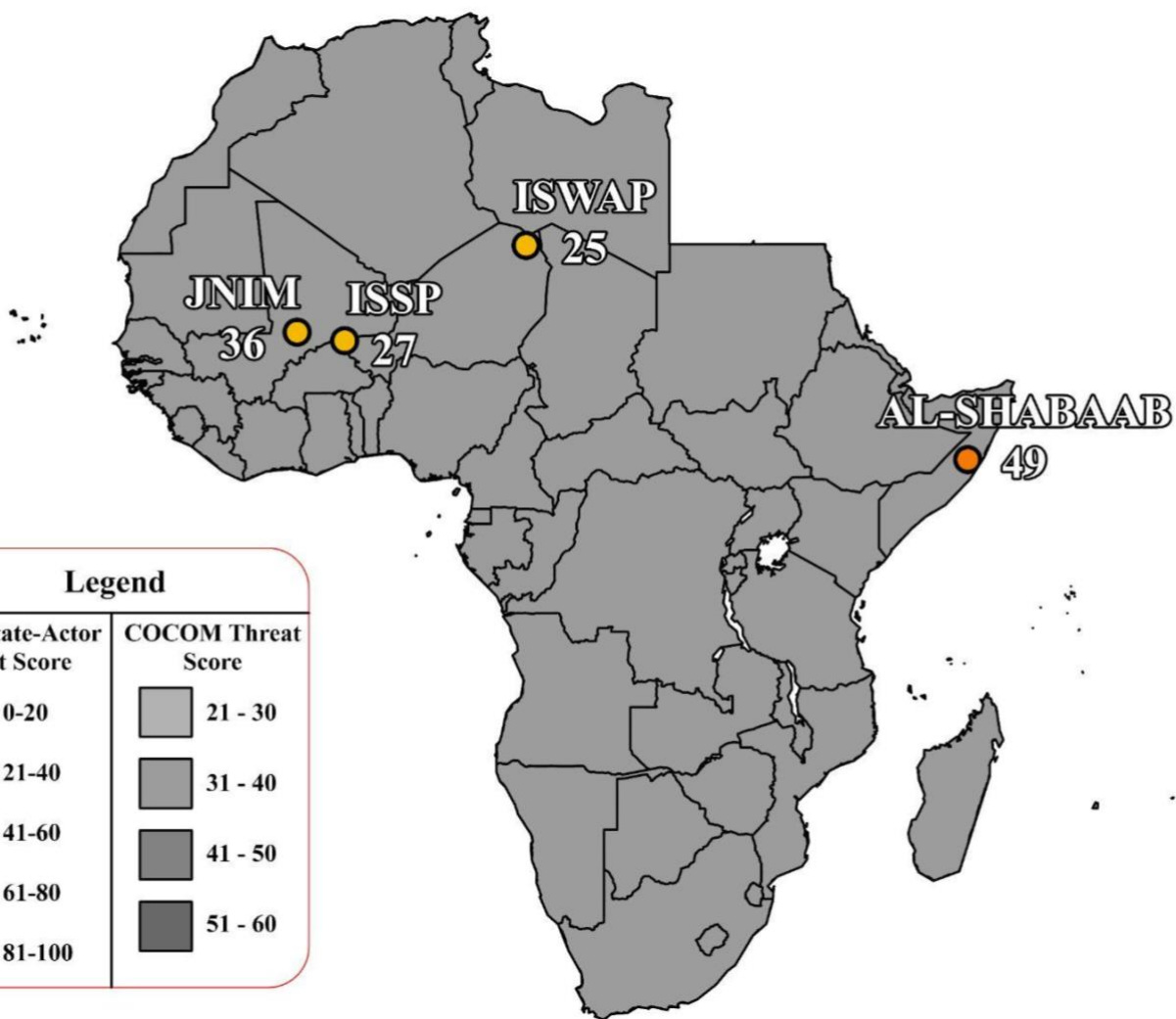
allocation. This method ensures that the lessons learned from our research are practically applicable to the current Army structure.

Layout

The following sections present regional threat findings, highlighting the most relevant trends and distinctions among VNSAs across the AFRICOM, CENTCOM, NORTHCOM/SOUTHCOM Areas of Responsibility (AOR). Each region is summarized through key judgments that capture relative Will and Capability as well as the broader dynamics shaping their activities. Taken together, these findings provide a structured foundation for assessing how regional threats compare and how they contribute to the overall threat environment facing the U.S. homeland.

Regional Threat Assessment

AFRICOM



COCOM Introduction

The AFRICOM AOR is a complex and ever-changing threat environment for the United States and its allies, due to fragile state institutions, widespread civil unrest, external interference, international competition over natural resources, and the proliferation of VNSAs.⁹ Africa suffers from weak political borders that divide ethnic groups, such as the Somali population spanning the Ethiopia-Somalia frontier; high political turnover, exemplified by the wave of coups across the Sahel; and recurrent power vacuums, where the absence of state authority allows VNSAs to seize territory and establish safe havens.^{12, 13, 14} This instability has been exacerbated by the recent withdrawal of French counterterrorism forces in the region and has cultivated the perfect environment for interference by both state and non-state actors.^{15, 16} In the wake of Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) era pressure on Middle-Eastern terror networks, Africa has become the new epicenter of terrorism, as violent non-state actors increasingly shape the continent's geopolitical and threat landscape.^{17, 18}

Major VEOs such as Al-Qaeda, Islamic State - Central, and their subsidiaries have reoriented their efforts from directly attacking the U.S. homeland to consolidating power in East and West Africa. The region's wealth of natural resources has simultaneously led to significant investments and pushes to gain military and security influence from state actors, including Russia and China.^{19, 20} AFRICOM's 2025 posture statement emphasizes its core mission of

⁹HORN Institute, *The HORN Bulletin, Volume VI, Issue I: January–February 2023*, “The Horn of Africa in 2023: A Geopolitical Analysis” (Nairobi: HORN International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023)

¹⁰Marta Kepe et al., *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in Africa*, RAND Corporation, RR-A969-2 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2023), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR969-2.html

¹¹Dimitri Zabelin, “Why Africa Will Become a Prominent Player in Global Geopolitics,” *World Economic Forum*, July 12, 2023.

¹²Alexandra Lewis, “Somali Boundaries and the Question of Statehood: The Case of Somaliland in Somalia,” in *Security, Clans and Tribes: Unstable Governance in Somaliland, Yemen and the Gulf of Aden* (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2015), 39–64, accessed August 15, 2025, chapter PDF via Springer, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9781137470751_3.

¹³Christian Houle and Jeffrey Conroy-Krutz, “Colonial Mapmaking, Ethnic Identity, and Traditional Authority in Africa,” *British Journal of Political Science* 55 (2025): e28:1–22.

¹⁴*Encyclopædia Britannica*, “List of African Countries’ Independence Dates,” updated June 18, 2025, accessed July 28, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/list-of-African-Countries-Independence-Dates>.

¹⁵RFI, “French Military to Leave Senegal amid Ongoing Withdrawal from Africa,” *RFI*, July 17, 2025, accessed July 27, 2025, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20250717-french-army-to-leave-senegal-amid-africa-downsizing>.

¹⁶Zachary Devlin-Foltz, *Africa’s Fragile States: Empowering Extremists, Exporting Terrorism*, Africa Security Brief no. 6 (Washington, DC: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, August 30, 2010), accessed August 12, 2025, <https://africacenter.org/publication/africas-fragile-states-empowering-extremists-exporting-terrorism/>.

¹⁷Emmanuel Akinwotu and Ayesha Rascoe, “Why Africa’s Sahel Region Has Been Called the ‘Epicenter of Global Terrorism,’” *NPR / KUOW*, March 9, 2025, accessed July 27, 2025, <https://www.kuow.org/stories/why-africa-s-sahel-region-has-been-called-the-epicenter-of-global-terrorism>.

¹⁸Tricia Bacon and Jason Warner, “Twenty Years After 9/11: The Threat in Africa—The New Epicenter of Global Jihadi Terror,” *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 7 (September 2021): 76–90, accessed August 12, 2025, PDF, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CTC-SENTINEL-072021.pdf>.

¹⁹Akinwotu and Rascoe, “Why Africa's Sahel Region.”

²⁰ODNI, *Annual Threat Assessment 2025*.

defending the United States from Africa-based threats, countering adversary influence, and ensuring readiness to respond to crises across the continent.²¹ This section focuses on how two Islamic State subsidiaries— ISWAP and ISSP — and two Al-Qaeda subsidiaries — Al-Shabaab and JNIM — contribute to the overall threat environment within AFRICOM’s AOR.

Group Profiles

Al-Shabaab

Overall Threat Score: **48.9** – Will: **7.3** – Capability: **6.7**

Al-Shabaab exhibits a steadfast Will to undermine U.S. interests, driven by its allegiance to Al-Qaeda and a history of targeting Western assets. While primarily focused on the Horn of Africa, the group’s persistent anti-American rhetoric and historical recruitment efforts within Somali-American communities underscore a continued intent to inspire or facilitate attacks against the U.S. homeland.²²

Capability remains robust as of 2025, underpinned by a diverse financial network that generates approximately \$100 million annually to sustain a force of 7,000–12,000 fighters.^{23, 24, 25} U.S. AFRICOM has assessed that the group has “proved both its will and capability to attack U.S. and partner forces,” evidenced by its arsenal of heavy weaponry and repeated strikes on American personnel in the region.²⁶

Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM)

Overall Threat Score: **35.9** – Will: **5.7** – Capability: **6.3**

Regarding Will, JNIM presents a complex threat profile as of 2025. While analysts note that the group’s “desire to conduct attacks beyond the Sahel is less clear,” its propaganda consistently portrays the United States as part of a “crusader coalition” and warns of retaliation should American military involvement in the region expand.²⁷ Despite this anti-Western

²¹Office of the Commander, U.S. Africa Command, “2025 Posture Statement to Congress” (presentation to the Senate Armed Services Committee, April 3, 2025), accessed July 27, 2025, <https://www.africom.mil/about-the-command/2025-posture-statement-to-congress>.

²²U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. “Terrorist Group Recruits, Radicalizes Somali American Youth.” Press Release, July 11, 2009. <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/media/dems/terrorist-group-recruits-radicalizes-somali-american-youth/>.

²³Council on Foreign Relations, “Al-Shabaab,” updated 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/al-shabaab>.

²⁴“Thirty-third report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2610 (2021) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities,” United Nations Security Council, January 29, 2024, paragraph 15.

²⁵ U.S. Department of the Treasury. “Treasury Designates al-Shabaab Financial Facilitators.” Press Release JY1028, October 17, 2022. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1028>.

²⁶ United States Africa Command. “U.S. Forces Conduct Significant Kinetic Strike Targeting ISIS-Somalia.” Press Release, May 31, 2023. <https://www.africom.mil/pressrelease/35771/us-forces-conduct-significant-kinetic-strike-targeting-isis-somalia>.

²⁷Catrina Doxsee, Alexander Palmer, and Riley McCabe, Global Terrorism Threat Assessment 2024 (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 8, 2024), <https://csis-website->

messaging and its allegiance to Al-Qaeda, U.S. intelligence assessments as of August 2025 maintain that the group remains regionally focused, with no evidence of operational planning or credible attempts directed at the U.S. homeland.²⁸

The group's Capability is anchored by a robust force of approximately 5,000–6,000 fighters operating across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, who are proficient in executing complex, coordinated assaults utilizing VBIEDs and mortar fire.²⁹ To sustain these operations, JNIM has established diversified illicit revenue streams—including gold mining, smuggling, ransom kidnappings, and extortion—that generate an estimated \$54–61 million annually.^{30, 31, 32}

Islamic State – Sahel Province (ISSP)

Overall Threat Score: **26.5** – Will: **5.3** – Capability: **5.0**

Despite its anti-U.S. rhetoric, ISSP has not demonstrated a sustained Will to target U.S. interests, with its only known direct attack on U.S. personnel being the October 4, 2017, Tongo Tongo ambush in Niger, which killed four American service members.³³ While arrests in Spain and Morocco suggest a limited international reach, ISSP remains a regionally focused threat lacking the ideological priority to mount attacks against the U.S. homeland.³⁴

As an official Islamic State affiliate recognized in 2022, the group's Capability is defined by a force of estimated 2,000–3,000 fighters operating across Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, often clashing with rival jihadist network JNIM.³⁵ To sustain its operations as of 2025, ISSP employs ambushes, IEDs, VBIEDs, and kidnappings, funded through extortion, smuggling, ransom payments, and gold-mine raids, though no major financial support from ISWAP has been

prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2024-02/240208_Doxsee_Global_Terrorism.pdf?VersionId=yNcjxwHMs48w8NFB0EMnpbA2OToZaPs7.

²⁸ODNI, *Annual Threat Assessment 2025*

²⁹Doxsee, Palmer, and McCabe, *Global Terrorism Threat Assessment 2024*, 12.

³⁰Daniel Eizenga and Wendy Williams, “The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel,” *Africa Security Brief* no. 38 (Washington, DC: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, December 2020), 4, <https://africacenter.org/publication/puzzle-jnim-militant-islamist-groups-sahel/>.

³¹Financial Action Task Force, *Terrorist Financing in West Africa* (Paris: FATF, May 2013), 22–23, <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/content/dam/fatf-gafi/reports/TF-in-West-Africa.pdf>.

³²Daniel Eizenga and Wendy Williams, *The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel*, *Africa Security Brief* no. 38 (Washington, DC: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, December 2020), 1–2.

³³CIA, “Terrorist Organizations,” *World Factbook*, accessed June 26, 2025, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/references/terrorist-organizations/>.

³⁴Catrina Doxsee et al., “Chapter 2,” *Global Terrorism Threat Assessment 2024*, CSIS, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/global-terrorism-threat-assessment-2024>.

³⁵Palmer et al., “Chapter 4: Africa,” *Global Terrorism Threat Assessment 2025*, CSIS, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/global-terrorism-threat-assessment-2025>.

confirmed.^{36, 37} However, the group currently lacks the logistical networks required to project this violence transnationally against the U.S. homeland.³⁸

Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)

Overall Threat Score: **24.9** – Will: **4.7** – Capability: **5.3**

With respect to Will, the group’s propaganda output—including a December 2024 training video depicting child soldiers and executions—reveals a deepening ideological alignment with Islamic State Core. Despite this radicalized posture, no credible indicators as of 2025 suggest an imminent intent or capacity to strike the U.S. homeland, though its expanding reach and technical innovation warrant continued monitoring.^{39, 40, 41, 42}

As of 2025, ISWAP stands as one of the Islamic State’s most active affiliates, demonstrating significant Capability by fielding an estimated 4,000–7,000 fighters across northeastern Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin.^{43, 44, 45} The group’s combat proficiency is underscored by the deployment of drone-delivered explosives and coordinated multi-pronged assaults, such as the May 2025 Buni Gari raid on fortified Nigerian military positions.^{46, 47, 48} To finance these operations, ISWAP has adopted sophisticated methods to avoid financial

³⁶Jared Thompson, "Examining Extremism: Islamic State in the Greater Sahara," CSIS, July 22, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-islamic-state-greater-sahara>.

³⁷United Nations ISIL and Al-Qaeda Sanctions Monitoring Team, Monitoring Team Reports, July 2024.

³⁸Catrina Doxsee et al., "Chapter 2," Global Terrorism Threat Assessment 2024, CSIS, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/global-terrorism-threat-assessment-2024>.

³⁹SpecialEurasia. "ISWAP Increased Activity and Jihadist Propaganda." SpecialEurasia, February 1, 2024. <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2024/02/01/iswap-terrorism-propaganda/>.

⁴⁰Sahara Reporters. "Report Reveals How Boko Haram, ISWAP Use Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram To Recruit, Spread Propaganda In Nigeria." Sahara Reporters, September 19, 2022. <https://saharareporters.com/2022/09/19/report-reveals-how-boko-haram-iswap-use-facebook-whatsapp-telegram-recruit-spread>.

⁴¹Ugwu, Francis. "ISWAP Concludes Plan to Launch Radio Station." Daily Post Nigeria, April 21, 2024. [dailypost.ng](https://www.dailypost.ng).

⁴²MEMRI Jihad and Terrorism Threat Monitor. "ISIS West Africa Video Shows Teens Executing Captives." Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), December 2024. <https://www.memri.org>.

⁴³Office of the Director of National Intelligence. 2025. "ISIS–West Africa." Terrorist Groups, National Counterterrorism Center (as of April 2025). https://www.dni.gov/nctc/terrorist_groups/isis_west_africa.html.

⁴⁴Bacon, Tricia, and Jason Warner. 2021. "Twenty Years After 9/11: The Threat in Africa — The New Epicenter of Global Jihadi Terror." CTC Sentinel 14 (7), September 2021. Combating Terrorism Center, U.S. Military Academy. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/twenty-years-after-9-11-the-threat-in-africa-the-new-epicenter-of-global-jihadi-terror/>.

⁴⁵United Nations Security Council. Report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL (Da’esh) to International Peace and Security and the Range of United Nations Efforts in Support of Member States in Counter-Terrorism. S/2024/556. New York: United Nations, June 2024. <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2024/556>.

⁴⁶Africa Defense Forum. "ISWAP Adds Armed Drones to Its Arsenal in Northeast Nigeria." Africa Defense Forum, May 2025. ISWAP Adds Armed Drones to Its Arsenal in Northeast Nigeria - Africa Defense Forum.

⁴⁷Aina, Folahanmi. "Why Islamic State Is Expanding Its Operations in North-Eastern Nigeria." The Conversation, accessed June 2025. <https://theconversation.com/why-islamic-state-is-expanding-its-operations-in-north-eastern-nigeria-256935>.

⁴⁸Zenn, Jacob. "Brief: ISWAP Raids in Northeastern Nigeria Upset Regional Status Quo." Terrorism Monitor, The Jamestown Foundation, June 25, 2025. <https://jamestown.org/program/brief-iswap-raids-in-northeastern-nigeria-upset-regional-status-quo/>.

surveillance, generating revenue through farmland taxation (₦10,000 per hectare), ransom kidnappings, and cryptocurrency-based fundraising.⁴⁹

VNSA Findings

- **Al-Shabaab is the Most Threatening AFRICOM VNSA:** Al-Shabaab (48.9) poses the most direct and capable threat to U.S. forces in AFRICOM, though not drastically more than other regional groups.
- **ISWAP and ISSP are Least Threatening AFRICOM VNSAs:** ISWAP (24.9) and ISSP (26.5) remain largely opportunistic and regionally focused, posing minimal direct threat to the U.S. homeland.
- **Most African VNSAs Have Medium Will Scores:** ISWAP (24.9), ISSP (26.5), and JNIM (35.9) hold moderate Will scores (4.5–6.0), while Al-Shabaab (48.9) stands out with a 7.3 due to persistent anti-U.S. targeting and propaganda.
- **Most African VNSAs Have Medium Capability Scores:** ISWAP (24.9), ISSP (26.5), and JNIM (35.9) demonstrate limited Capability (5.0–6.3), while Al-Shabaab (48.9) diverges with higher Capability (6.7).

Analysis

- **Consistent Levels of Motivation and Capability:** Most African VNSAs display similar levels of Will and Capability (see Figure 4), reflecting their shared Salafi-jihadist ideology and focus on regional, not global, objectives.
- **Isolated but Acute East African Threat:** Al-Shabaab (48.9) remains the most isolated yet dangerous VNSA in East Africa, while West African groups present more diffuse but regionally widespread threats.
- **A Regional African, Not Global Outlook:** ISWAP (24.9), ISSP (26.5), and JNIM (35.9) are focused on regional governance and control, not global operations.
- **Many AFRICOM VNSAs, but Less Threatening Than Other AOR VNSAs:** Compared to CENTCOM or NORTHCOM/SOUTHCOM VNSAs, African groups pose a lower direct threat to the U.S. homeland.
- **AFRICOM AOR Challenge:** While African VNSAs currently pose only a mild-to-moderate homeland threat, weak governance and regional volatility allow them to flourish locally and attract foreign partnerships, with risks increasing as Western counterterrorism efforts wane.

⁴⁹Africa Defense Forum. “Shadowy Funding Streams Finance ISWAP Attacks.” Africa Defense Forum, June 3, 2025. [adf-magazine.com](https://www.adf-magazine.com)+6adf-magazine.com+6adf-magazine.com+6.

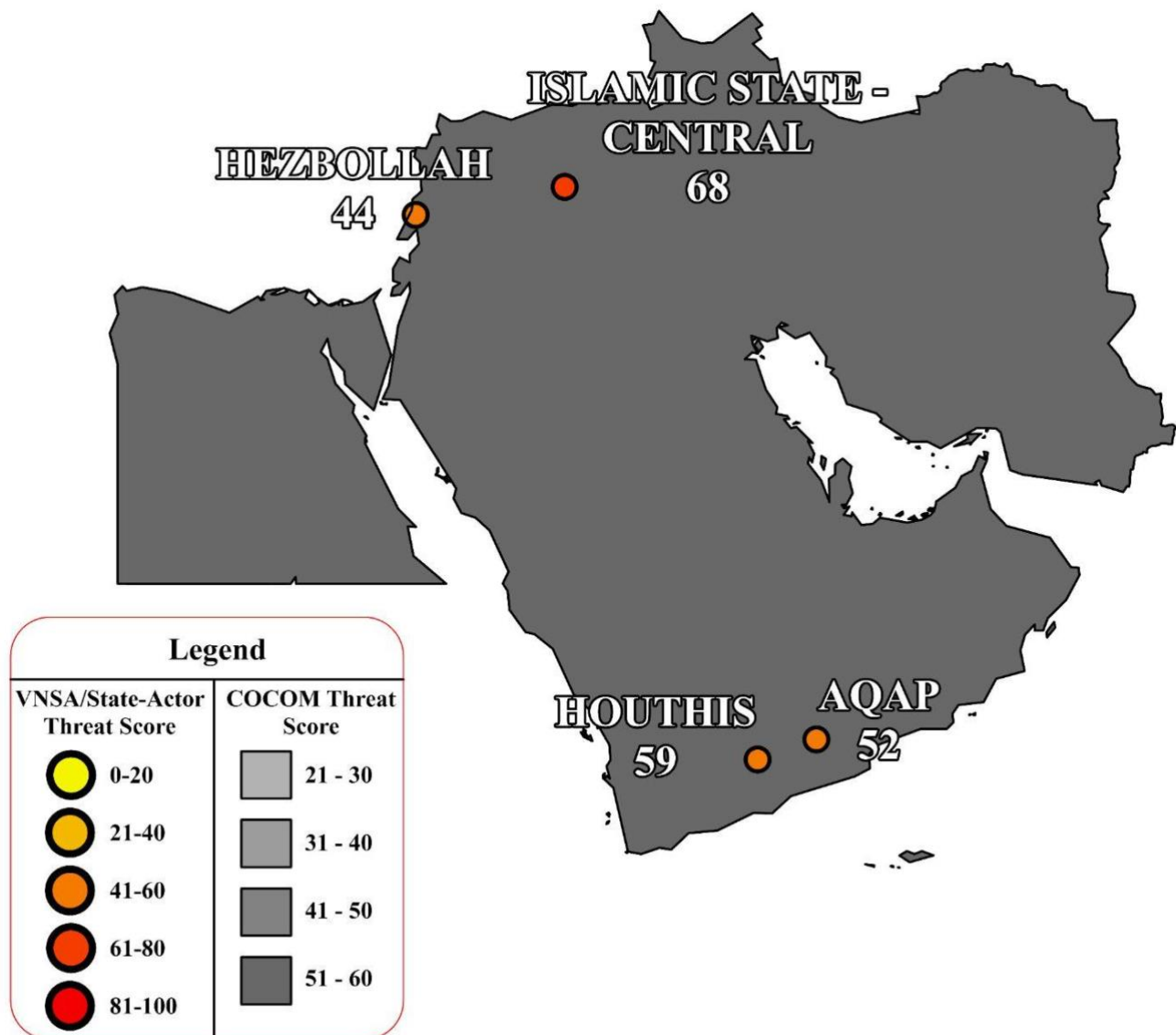
- **High Potential for VNSA-State Collusion:** Though direct evidence is limited, state actors like Iran and Russia could exploit VNSAs, significantly amplifying threats to U.S. operations.
- **Africa as a Key AQ and IS Node:** Civil unrest, weak governance, and external meddling have created an environment ripe for VNSA expansion. If groups like Al-Shabaab (48.9) consolidate regional control, they could pivot toward global operations targeting the United States and its allies.

Figure 4:
AFRICOM VNSA Threat Summary as of August 2025

VNSA Name	Overall Threat Score	Metric	Score	Justification
Al-Shabaab	48.9	Will	7.3	Deeply ingrained anti-U.S. sentiment, consistently demonstrated through its attacks on U.S. interests in East Africa and its explicit identification of the U.S. as an adversary in its propaganda.
		Capability	6.7	Characterized by advanced explosives expertise, tactical adaptability, and recent acquisitions of sophisticated weaponry through its Houthi partnership, enabling persistent and evolving threats against U.S. and partner forces in East Africa, and possessing the strength to combat the Somali government.
JNIM	35.9	Will	5.7	Frames all Western forces (implicitly including U.S. personnel and assets) as "occupiers" and aligns rhetorically with global Al-Qaeda directives, suggesting a conditional intent that could translate into direct anti-U.S. action if U.S. involvement in the Sahel escalates.
		Capability	6.3	Skilled in complex military operations in their home region, they have efficient sources of funding through criminal enterprises, and could pose a serious threat to U.S. personnel in their operational area.
Islamic State - Sahel Province (ISSP)	26.5	Will	5.3	Holds an ideologically anti-U.S. stance and has used hostile rhetoric, but its operational focus remains on local regimes, with no consistent intent or demonstrated effort to target U.S. interests beyond opportunistic or retaliatory attacks in the Sahel.
		Capability	5.0	Has shown the ability to target U.S. personnel in West Africa using small arms and IEDs, but lacks the reach, support, and infrastructure to pose a direct threat to the U.S. homeland.
Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)	24.9	Will	4.7	ISWAP has expanded its propaganda efforts, aligned operationally with the Islamic State core, and maintained a clear intent to grow its influence in West Africa, all while continuing to pursue ideologically driven actions that threaten U.S. interests abroad.
		Capability	5.3	ISWAP is one of the most tactically capable VEOs in sub-Saharan Africa, with a strong regional presence, a steady stream of funding, and a record of coordinated attacks—yet its ability to project violence against the U.S. homeland is limited.

Regional Threat Assessment

CENTCOM 1: MIDDLE EAST



COCOM Introduction

As of August 2025, the Middle East, encompassed within the CENTCOM AOR, remains one of the most strategically significant and volatile regions in the world.⁵⁰ It is home to multiple international VNSAs with long-standing grievances and expansive ideological ambitions, whose operational capabilities range from highly organized forces equipped with advanced drones and missiles to decentralized networks reliant on guerrilla-style attacks and improvised explosive devices.⁵¹ The region is characterized by fragile state systems, sectarian conflict, unresolved territorial disputes, and a dense network of state-VNSA collusion, proxy warfare, and international competition.⁵² Islamic State - Central, AQAP, Hezbollah, and the Houthis each pose distinct threats to U.S.⁵³ personnel, assets, and allies both within and beyond the region.⁵⁴ The presence of U.S. troops, allies, and infrastructure in countries like Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and the Gulf states ensures that the U.S. interests remain squarely in the crosshairs of ideologically motivated actors.^{55, 56, 57}

Since the height of the GWOT, many of the most ideologically extreme and operationally capable terrorist groups have continued to center their efforts within this region.⁵⁸ The withdrawal of coalition forces in late 2025 risks recreating the strategic vacuum left by the 2011 U.S. departure, which enabled Islamic State - Central's resurgence by 2014. In the absence of a stabilizing presence, extremist groups are likely to capitalize on weakened governance and persistent instability in Syria and Iraq, renewing the cycle of insurgency and regional disruption. These threats manifest in various ways: kinetic attacks, the use of advanced weapon systems such as drones and ballistic missiles, cyber operations, and targeted influence campaigns

⁵⁰ODNI, Annual Threat Assessment, 2025, 15–17

⁵¹Office of the Commander, U.S. Central Command, Statement of General Michael “Erik” Kurilla on the Posture of U.S. Central Command before the House Armed Services Committee, March 7, 2024, accessed August 12, 2025, <https://www.centcom.mil/ABOUT-US/POSTURE-STATEMENT/>.

⁵²United Nations Security Council, Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, *Monitoring Team’s Thirty-second Report to the Security Council pursuant to resolutions 1526 (2004) and 2253 (2015) concerning ISIL (Da’esh) and Al-Qaida*, UN document S/2023/549 (July 25, 2023), accessed August 12, 2025, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/monitoring-team-reports>.

⁵³Dhabian, “The Continuing Threat of ISIS in Iraq.”

⁵⁴Brian Carter, “A U.S. Withdrawal from Syria Will Reinvigorate the ISIS Terror Threat,” *Critical Threats Project*, February 26, 2025, accessed August 12, 2025, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/us-withdrawal-syria-will-reinvigorate-isis-terror-threat>.

⁵⁵Alexander Palmer et al., “Chapter 3: The Middle East,” in *Global Terrorism Threat Assessment 2025* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025), 17–27, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2025-03/250328_Palmer_Global_Terrorism.pdf.

⁵⁶Catarina Doxsee et al. “Chapter 6: Middle East.” In *Global Terrorism Threat Assessment 2024*. CSIS, 2024

⁵⁷Aaron Y. Zelin, “Remaining, Waiting for Expansion (Again): The Islamic State’s Operations in Iraq and Syria,” *Hudson Institute*, December 5, 2024, accessed August 12, 2025, <https://www.hudson.org/international-organizations/remaining-waiting-expansion-again-islamic-states-operations-iraq-syria>.

⁵⁸“The Islamic State Five Years Later: Persistent Threats, U.S. Options,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, March 21, 2024, accessed August 12, 2025, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-state-five-years-later-persistent-threats-us-options>.

designed to undermine American influence.⁵⁹ This assessment examines the threats posed by four of the region’s most prominent VNSAs.⁶⁰ It applies our Will and Capability metric to evaluate their potential to conduct or support anti-U.S. actions, and contextualizes those scores within the broader security environment of the Middle East.^{61, 62}

Group Profiles

Islamic State (Islamic State - Central)

Overall Threat Score: **67.9** – Will: **9.7** – Capability: **7.0**

Islamic State - Central maintains an unwavering Will to target the United States and its allies, evidenced by a resilient global propaganda network centered on the weekly Al-Naba newsletter. This outlet frequently disseminates anti-American disinformation—such as “The American Tariff Battle” and denunciations of U.S. diplomacy—to maintain its ideological hold.^{63, 64} The group’s persistent intent to harm the U.S. is further demonstrated by its ability to inspire attacks on American soil, including the January 1, 2025, New Orleans incident and the failed 2015 Garland, Texas plot.^{65, 66}

Regarding Capability, despite losing its territorial caliphate in 2019, the group continues to operate as a potent underground insurgency in the Syrian Desert and Iraq’s Jazira region, fielding approximately 1,500–3,000 fighters with \$10–20 million in liquid assets.^{67, 68, 69} It has proven its residual operational strength through attacks on U.S. assets overseas, such as the

⁵⁹Masood Al-Hakari, “Without a Caliphate, But Far from Defeated: Why Da’esh/ISIS Remains a Threat in Syria in 2025,” *PRIF Blog*, April 7, 2025, accessed August 12, 2025, <https://blog.prif.org/2025/04/07/without-a-caliphate-but-far-from-defeated-why-daesh-isis-remains-a-threat-in-syria-in-2025/>.

⁶⁰Katherine Zimmerman and Nathan Vincent, “The State of Al Qaeda and ISIS in 2023,” *Critical Threats Project*, September 11, 2023, accessed August 12, 2025, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/the-state-of-al-qaeda-and-isis-in-2023>.

⁶¹Clayton Thomas and Jim Zanotti, *Lebanese Hezbollah*, CRS In Focus IF10703 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, updated December 4, 2024), accessed August 12, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF10703>.

⁶²Council on Foreign Relations, “What Is Hezbollah?” *Backgrounder*, October 29, 2024, accessed August 14, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-hezbollah>.

⁶³MEMRI Jihad & Terrorism Threat Monitor (JTTM). “ISIS’s Al-Naba’ Editorial Slams President Trump’s Tariffs, Predicts Global Socioeconomic Collapse.” MEMRI, April 17, 2025.

⁶⁴SpecialEurasia. “Al-Naba 495: Islamic State’s Propaganda Against al-Sharaa and the Syrian-Israeli Normalisation Tracks.” SpecialEurasia, May 18, 2025.

⁶⁵Federal Bureau of Investigation. “Bourbon Street Attack Investigation Updates.” FBI, published January 1, 2025.

⁶⁶Salon. “Tear Up Texas: How the FBI Played a Central Role in the First ISIS Attack on U.S. Soil.” Salon, March 30, 2017. https://www.salon.com/2017/03/30/tear-up-texas-how-the-fbi-played-a-central-role-in-the-first-isis-attack-on-u-s-soil_partner/.

⁶⁷PRIF (Peace Research Institute Frankfurt). “Without a Caliphate, But Far from Defeated: Why Da’esh/ISIS Remains a Threat in Syria in 2025.” PRIF Blog, April 7, 2025.

⁶⁸Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). “Global Terrorism Index 2025: Implications for U.S. National Security.” CSIS, March 28, 2025.

⁶⁹United Nations Security Council. “Thirty-Fifth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team on ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities – S/2025/71/Rev.1.” 6 February 2025.

Manbij suicide bombing. Recent activity, such as the IED attacks against Syrian security forces in May 2025, further highlights a level of tactical proficiency that continues to destabilize the region and threaten the security of the U.S. led coalition.⁷⁰ Looking ahead, the U.S. and coalition withdrawal in September 2025, combined with the fall of the Assad regime and the precarious status of 28 detention facilities housing 10,000 fighters, creates a high potential for resurgence within 12–24 months, echoing the post-2011 dynamics.^{71, 72, 73}

Ansar Allah (Houthis)

Overall Threat Score: **58.4** – Will: **8.0** – Capability: **7.3**

The group’s leadership, under Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, demonstrates a high Will to target U.S. interests, espousing explicit anti-U.S. and anti-Israel rhetoric. In January 2025, al-Houthi declared that they are “preparing to carry out more impactful and effective attacks that Israel and the United States will not anticipate.”⁷⁴ This hostile intent has been substantiated by direct attacks on U.S. assets, including the 2016 missile attack on the *USS Mason*, kidnappings of U.S. citizens and former diplomats as recently as 2024, and more than 50 strikes on coalition and commercial shipping in the Red Sea.⁷⁵

Functioning as a de facto governing authority, the Houthis possess significant Capability, controlling roughly 70% of Yemeni territory and wielding state-like military power bolstered by Iranian, IRGC, and Hezbollah support.⁷⁶ While the group's operational focus is largely localized on consolidating control within Yemen, it projects regional power via advanced UAV, UUV, and missile programs, making it a persistent and capable threat to U.S. forces and shipping in the Red Sea corridor.⁷⁷

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

Overall Threat Score: **52.2** – Will: **8.7** – Capability: **6.0**

AQAP maintains a very high Will to target the United States and its allies, standing as one of Al-Qaeda’s most ideologically committed and operationally experienced branches. This intent was reaffirmed by the group's propaganda arm—notably the 2023 relaunch of *Inspire*

⁷⁰ BBC News. “Syria Attack: Four Americans Killed in IS-Claimed Manbij Blast.” BBC, 17 January 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-46922999>.

⁷¹ Critical Threats Project. “Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update, March 29, 2023.” American Enterprise Institute, March 29, 2023. <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-update-march-29-2023>.

⁷² Institute for the Study of War. “A US Withdrawal from Syria Will Reinvigorate the ISIS Terror Threat.” ISW Backgrounder, February 26 2025.

⁷³ PRIF (Peace Research Institute Frankfurt). “Without a Caliphate, But Far from Defeated: Why Da’esh/ISIS Remains a Threat in Syria in 2025.” PRIF Blog, April 7, 2025.

⁷⁴ Counter Extremism Project, “Houthis,” accessed July 3, 2025, <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/houthis>.

⁷⁵ U.S. Central Command, Posture Statement, accessed July 3, 2025, <https://www.centcom.mil/ABOUT-US/POSTURE-STATEMENT/>.

⁷⁶ Mapping Militants Project, “Ansar Allah,” accessed July 3, 2025, <https://mappingmilitants.org/profiles/ansar-allah>.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

magazine—which explicitly called for “lone jihad” attacks against the United States and published bomb-making guidance to support its “far enemy” focus.⁷⁸

While the group has not successfully executed a U.S. homeland attack since the 2019 Pensacola Naval Air Station shooting and numerous failed attempts, including the 2009 failed “Underwear Bomber” plot, it retains sufficient Capability to threaten U.S. regional forces and inspire homegrown extremists, sustaining an overall threat score of 52.2/100.^{79, 80} Despite losing territorial control, AQAP operates as a dispersed insurgency of 2,000–3,000 fighters across southern Yemen, generating approximately \$10–15 million annually through kidnapping, smuggling, extortion, and hawala-based donations.^{81, 82} This financial resilience, combined with battle-hardened cadres and the use of improvised drones, ensures the group remains a persistent regional threat.

Hezbollah

Overall Threat Score: **43.8** – Will: **6.0** – Capability: **7.3**

Hezbollah’s Will to threaten U.S. interests is largely influenced by its alignment with Iran, meaning direct attacks on the U.S. homeland would likely depend on Tehran’s strategic direction. Despite this conditional posture, U.S. federal cases—specifically those of Ali Kourani, Samer El Debek, and Alexei Saab—reveal that the group has successfully deployed operatives to

⁷⁸ U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security, “Understanding the Threat to the Homeland from AQAP,” hearing, 113th Cong., 1st sess., April 9, 2013, 5, <https://www.congress.gov/event/113th-congress/house-event/LC973/text>.

⁷⁹ Alex Thurston, “Where Do We Stand with Al-Qaeda and ISIS? International Salafi Networks in 2024,” Small Wars Journal, July 16, 2024, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/2024/07/16/where-do-we-stand-al-qaeda-and-isis-international-salafi-networks-2024/>.

⁸⁰ Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI). 2025 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community. Washington, D.C.: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, February 5, 2025. <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/reports-publications/reports-publications-2025/item/2367-2025-annual-threat-assessment>

⁸¹ United Nations Security Council. Letter Dated 25 July 2024 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolution 751 (1992) Concerning Somalia and Eritrea Addressed to the President of the Security Council. S/2024/556. New York: United Nations, July 25, 2024. <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/191/91/pdf/n2419191.pdf>

⁸² Yaya J. Fanusie and Alex Entz, “Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula Financial Assessment,” Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 24 July 2017, 6–8.

conduct surveillance and receive training for potential attacks, demonstrating a latent intent to strike if ordered.^{83, 84, 85, 86}

With a near-state-level combat Capability, as of 2024, Hezbollah fields roughly 30,000 active fighters and up to 20,000 reserves, controlling an arsenal of approximately 120,000–200,000 rockets and missiles, including precision-guided munitions.⁸⁷ This military strength is underpinned by extensive Iranian enablement, with the U.S. Treasury estimating that Tehran provides over \$700 million in annual funding.⁸⁸ Furthermore, the group sustains a resilient global infrastructure, utilizing criminal and logistics networks in Latin America to project power far beyond its Lebanese stronghold.⁸⁹

VNSA Findings

- **CENTCOM 1 VNSAs Pose the Most Acute Threat:** Islamic State - Central (67.9), AQAP (52.2), Hezbollah (43.8), and the Houthis (58.4) collectively represent the highest and most persistent threat to U.S. interests out of all examined VNSAs due to ideology, capability, and state backing.
- **Islamic State Central is the Most Threatening VNSA:** Islamic State - Central (67.9) remains the most immediate and ideologically driven threat to the United States from the CENTCOM 1 region. It holds the highest Overall Threat Score, followed by the Houthis (58.4) and AQAP (52.2). While Hezbollah (43.8) has a lower overall score, its near-state-level Capability makes it a unique risk compared to the high Will but lower Capability of the Salafi-jihadist groups.

⁸³ U.S. Department of Justice. “Hizballah Operative Sentenced to 40 Years in Prison for Covert Terrorist Activities on Behalf of Hizballah’s Islamic Jihad Organization.” Office of Public Affairs, December 5, 2023. <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/hizballah-operative-sentenced-40-years-prison-covert-terrorist-activities-behalf-hizballah-s>

⁸⁴ U.S. Department of Justice. “Bronx Man and Michigan Man Arrested for Terrorist Activities on Behalf of Hizballah’s Islamic Jihad Organization.” U.S. Attorney’s Office, Southern District of New York, September 19, 2019. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/bronx-man-and-michigan-man-arrested-terrorist-activities-behalf-hizballah-s-islamic>

⁸⁵ U.S. Department of Justice. “New Jersey Man Sentenced to 12 Years in Prison for Receiving Military-Type Training from Hizballah’s External Terrorist Operation Known as the Islamic Jihad Organization.” Office of Public Affairs, December 3, 2021. <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/new-jersey-man-sentenced-12-years-prison-receiving-military-type-training-hezbollah-marriage>

⁸⁶ Worman, Jessica, and Colin P. Clarke. *Hezbollah’s Global Reach: Assessing the Threat of Its Networks in Latin America*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2023. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PEA3500/PEA3585-1/RAND_PEA3585-1.pdf

⁸⁷ Seth G. Jones. *The Coming Conflict with Hezbollah*. Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), March 21, 2024. https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2024-03/240321_Jones_Coming_Hezbollah.pdf

⁸⁸ Katzman, Kenneth. “Iran’s Islamist Proxies.” Wilson Center, April 3, 2024. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/irans-islamist-proxies>

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

- **High Will and Capability Across All Groups:** Islamic State - Central (67.9) and AQAP (52.2) score highest in Will, while Hezbollah and the Houthis have the highest Capability due to Iranian support. This creates a complex and layered threat.

Analysis

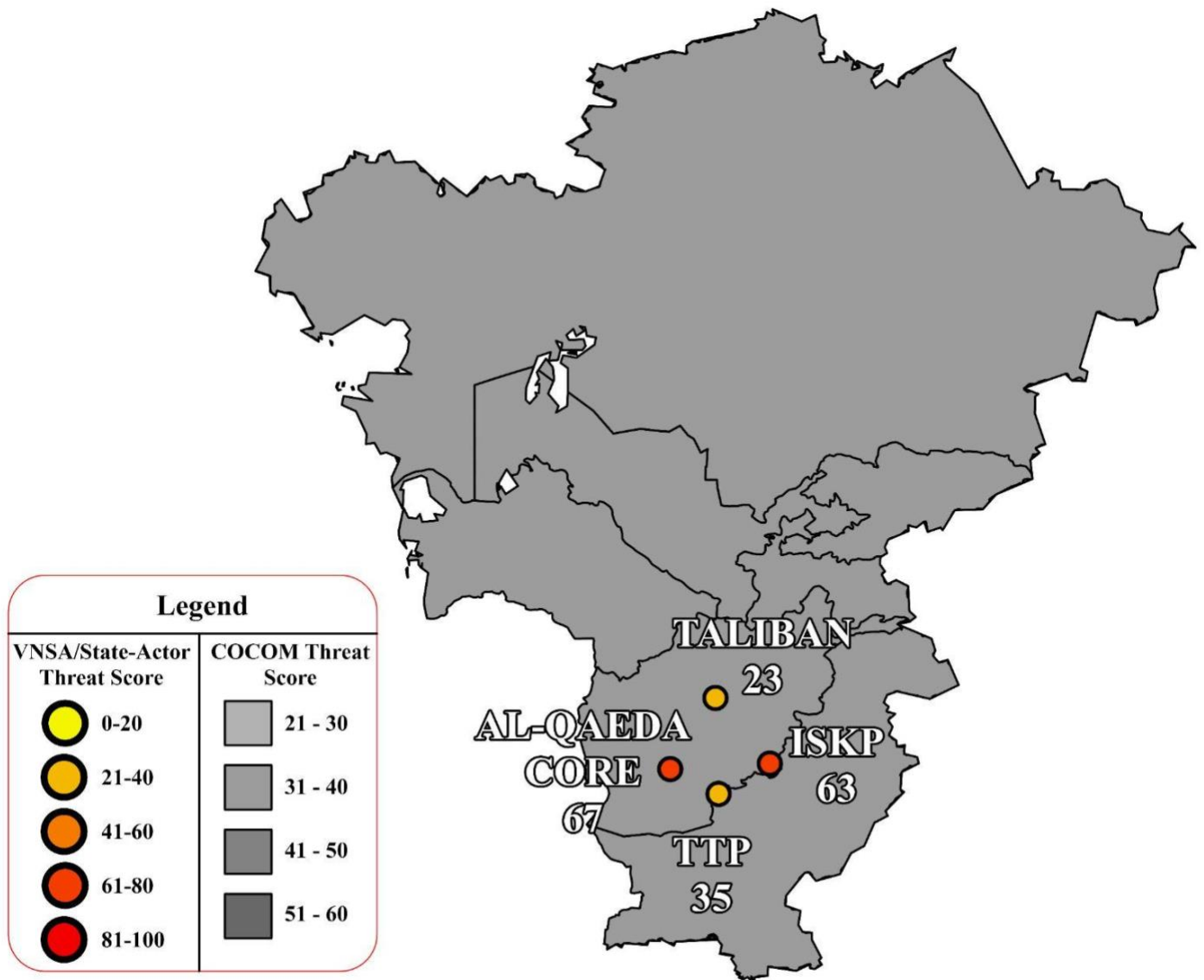
- **Exceptionally High Capability Scores:** CENTCOM 1 groups are uniquely Capable compared to other regions (see Figure 5), with access to advanced weaponry and organizational depth.
- **Hezbollah and the Houthis as Asymmetric Actors:** Both groups leverage advanced weapons and proxy roles to destabilize the region and threaten U.S. allies and assets.
- **Decentralized Networks and Technical Threats:** Islamic State - Central (67.9) and AQAP (52.2) exploit propaganda, encrypted communication, and bomb-making expertise to inspire and enable attacks.
- **Diverse Operational Scopes:** Hezbollah's (43.8) global networks contrast with Islamic State - Central (67.9) and AQAP's (52.2) kinetic terrorism focus, producing a broad spectrum of targeting strategies.
- **The Middle East as the Strategic Center of VNSA Threats:** The convergence of ideology, capability, and state sponsorship makes CENTCOM the most strategically relevant threat environment for U.S. counterterrorism.
- **Persistent Islamic State - Central Threat:** Despite territorial losses, Islamic State - Central remains resilient through decentralized command and propaganda, posing enduring risks of resurgence.
- **AQAP's Aviation and Bomb-Making Threats:** AQAP retains unique expertise for homeland targeting, even if its global reach lags behind Islamic State - Central.
- **Adaptive, State-Supported Threats:** Islamic State - Central and AQAP focus on direct terrorism, while Hezbollah and the Houthis pursue hybrid warfare, ensuring CENTCOM 1's threats remain both diverse and enduring.

Figure 5:
CENTCOM 1 (Middle East) VNSA Threat Summary as of August 2025

VNSA Name	Overall Threat Score	Metric	Score	Justification
Islamic State - Central	67.9	Will	9.7	Islamic State - Central's Salafi-jihadist ideology, enduring history of conflict with the United States, prior attacks on U.S. soil, persistent anti-American rhetoric, and its enduring ambition to reestablish a powerful caliphate all indicate a high willingness to conduct direct attacks against the U.S. homeland.
		Capability	7.0	The Islamic State - Central currently possesses only a limited capability to project violence directly onto the U.S. homeland due to its degraded leadership, loss of territorial control, and operational containment, but its ability to inspire decentralized attacks remains intact.
Houthis (Ansar Allah)	58.4	Will	8.0	The Houthi rebel group has historically identified the United States as an enemy; however, until recent years, they have not directly acted on that designation. In 2025, the Houthis have become a direct threat to the U.S., its assets, and interests in the region.
		Capability	7.3	The Houthis receive considerable backing and resources from Iran and possess a highly capable arsenal of missiles and drones and have demonstrated their intention to use said weapons. Their allegiance and support from a state actor largely amplifies and strengthens their capabilities across the board.
Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)	52.2	Will	8.7	AQAP exhibits a very high will to conduct violent action against the United States because its leadership and media organs consistently frame the U.S. as the "far enemy," provide detailed instructions for attacks on American targets, and openly call for violence, albeit tempered by its simultaneous focus on local Yemeni objectives.
		Capability	6.0	AQAP's capability for violent anti-U.S. action merits a moderate-high score because, although it fields several thousand battle-hardened fighters proficient in IED and emerging drone tactics and sustains resilient financing and logistics within Yemen, it lacks external safe havens or facilitation networks that would allow it to mount operations on U.S. soil.
Hezbollah	43.8	Will	6.0	Hezbollah maintains strong anti-U.S. rhetoric and has targeted U.S. diplomats, facilities, and forces. While its main focus is Israel and Lebanese politics, it aligns with Iran's effort to curb U.S. influence and continues attacks on U.S. troops and coalition partners in the region, though it avoids direct homeland operations.
		Capability	7.3	Hezbollah, backed by Iranian funding, training, and advanced arms—including rockets, missiles, and drones—fields about 30,000 fighters and a global network capable of complex regional attacks against U.S. forces. It lacks confirmed WMD capabilities and has limited direct access to the U.S. homeland.

Regional Threat Assessment

CENTCOM 2: SOUTH ASIA



COCOM Introduction

According to CENTCOM 2 assessments, South Asia continues to experience a complex and evolving landscape of terrorist threats, terrorism, and instability within the region, as the threat level remains high. Most countries within South Asia, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, have experienced terrorism, while only Bhutan and the Maldives remain relatively unaffected. Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India are the three most affected by large numbers of attacks, with Pakistan being the most impacted.⁹⁰ Poor socio-economic conditions, religious and political differences, ongoing regional and domestic conflicts, and ineffective security pressure enable extremist groups within the region to exploit weak states to plan and execute attacks domestically or in neighboring countries. There are numerous VNSA groups active in South Asia; however, the four most prominent groups are ISKP, the TTP, Al-Qaeda core, and the Taliban. Among these, the Taliban is particularly significant for U.S. monitoring, as it is the only group with political control over a country. Other notable groups within the region include: the Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Hizbul Mujahideen (HM), Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), Jundullah, and the Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA).

The United States closely monitors South Asia due to its impact on counterterrorism efforts and as a potential environment for breeding and harboring terrorist organizations. Both CENTCOM and the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) oversee operations in this region. CENTCOM's area of responsibility includes Afghanistan and Pakistan, while INDOPACOM covers India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives.⁹¹ CENTCOM directs and enables military operations with allies and partners to enhance regional security and stability, in pursuit of enduring U.S. interests, including deterring and countering terrorism.⁹² CENTCOM conducts military operations and activities in collaboration with allies and partners to enhance regional security and stability, thereby reinforcing U.S. strategic priorities.

Group Profiles

Al-Qaeda Core

Overall Threat Score: **67.0** – Will: **10.0** – Capability: **6.7**

Al-Qaeda Core exhibits a maximum Will to target the United States, a posture cemented by its role as the orchestrator of the September 11th attacks and its demonstrated extreme hostility toward the USG. Despite suffering leadership losses—most notably Ayman al-

⁹⁰Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2024: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney, Australia: IEP, 2024), accessed August 12, 2025, <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/GTI-2024-web-290224.pdf>.

⁹¹U.S. Central Command, "Area of Responsibility," *U.S. Central Command website*, accessed August 12, 2025, <https://www.centcom.mil/AREA-OF-RESPONSIBILITY/>.

⁹²U.S. Central Command, "USCENTCOM Commander Visits Pakistan," press release no. 20240509-01, May 9, 2024, accessed August 12, 2025, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3770726/uscentcom-commander-visits-pakistan/>.

Zawahiri—and facing intense competition from rival jihadist groups, the organization remains steadfast in its intent to maintain a regional presence and rebuild its operational capacity.⁹³

With regard to Capability, the group maintains an expansive reach across the region and globe through its central organization, five regional affiliates, and various associated subgroups.⁹⁴ Although sustained counterterrorism efforts have considerably diminished its strength, intelligence assessments estimate that Al-Qaeda Core comprises approximately 50,000 fighters across Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, with another 50,000 personnel spread throughout its affiliate networks.⁹⁵

Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)

Overall Threat Score: **63.0** – Will: **9.0** – Capability: **7.0**

ISKP exhibits a heightened Will to target the United States, reflected by its declared ideological commitment to attacking U.S. interests, its alignment with IS Central’s global targeting priorities, and its persistent propaganda incitement against Western targets.⁹⁶ To date, ISKP’s operational objectives have been primarily focused on local and regional targets, having carried out numerous attacks in Afghanistan, against the Taliban, as well as in Russia, Iran, and Pakistan but the group maintains the overt desire to develop its ability to attack the United States.^{97 98} In 2025, ISKP leadership expressed their support for attacks against the U.S., indicating and maintaining an unwavering hostility towards the United States.⁹⁹

Regarding Capability, the group’s organizational structure has proven resilient despite sustained counterterrorism pressure. Although it has lost significant leadership and territorial holdings to U.S. airstrikes and Taliban offensives, its decentralized networks have proven adaptive, facilitating cross-border recruitment and the integration of foreign fighters from South and Central Asia.¹⁰⁰ ISKP has demonstrated its lethality through numerous attacks in the region, most notably the 2021 bombing of the Hamid Karzai International Airport that killed 183 people, including 13 U.S. service members.¹⁰¹ Estimates suggest the group fields approximately 1,000 to

⁹³ Jackson, K. (2024). The State of al-Qa`ida Central. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 17(4). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-state-of-al-qaida-central/>

⁹⁴ Rosenau, W., Powell, A. “Al-Qaeda Core: A Case Study”. Center for Naval Analysis (CNA). 2017. <https://www.cna.org/reports/2017/DIM-2017-U-016117-2Rev.pdf>

⁹⁵ Al-Qaeda Focus & Capabilities: Intelligence Assessment. (2024, July 15). Afghanistan United Front. <https://www.afghanistanunitedfront.org/al-qaeda-focus-and-capabilities/>

⁹⁶ Palmer, A., Doxsee, C., & Thompson, A. (2025). Chapter 3: The Middle East. In *Global Terrorism Threat Assessment 2025* (pp. 35–40). Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies.

⁹⁷ Bacon, T. (2024). The Islamic State in Khorasan Province: Exploiting a Counterterrorism Gap. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/islamic-state-khorasan-province-exploiting-counterterrorism-gap>

⁹⁸ ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K). (2025, March). National Counterterrorism Center; National Counterterrorism Center. https://www.dni.gov/nctc/terrorist_groups/isis_khorasan.html

⁹⁹ *ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K)*. (2025, March). National Counterterrorism Center; National Counterterrorism Center. https://www.dni.gov/nctc/terrorist_groups/isis_khorasan.html

¹⁰⁰ Palmer, A., Doxsee, C., & Thompson, A. (2025). Chapter 3: The Middle East. In *Global Terrorism Threat Assessment 2025* (pp. 35–40). Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies.

¹⁰¹ Doxsee, C., Thompson, J., & Hwang, G. (2021, September 8). Examining Extremism: Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). Center for Strategic and International Studies. <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-islamic-state-khorasan-province-iskp>

6,000 fighters known for utilizing remote detonation explosives, suicide attacks, and abductions, supported by considerable financial assets valued at around \$2.5 million.^{102, 103}

Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

Overall Threat Score: **35.0** – Will: **5.0** – Capability: **7.0**

TTP retains deep-seated ideological hostility, demonstrated by its support of the Taliban's insurgency against U.S. forces between 2001-2021 and its 2010 attack on the U.S. Consulate in Pakistan, where it killed local guards and vowed more strikes on Americans.^{104, 105} However, in the last decade, the group's Will to attack the U.S. homeland has diminished as leaders have deliberately deprioritized international plots to focus on overthrowing the Pakistani government.¹⁰⁶

Despite this shift in focus, the group retains heightened Capability, fielding an estimated 2,500 to 6,000 fighters with access to considerable weapons caches, training bases, experienced technical experts, and suicide squads.^{107, 108} U.S. intelligence warns that while operations in recent years have focused exclusively on Islamabad, the group's "capabilities, historical ties to al-Qa'ida, and previous support to operations targeting the United States keep us concerned about the potential future threat."¹⁰⁹

Taliban

Overall Threat Score: **23.3** – Will: **3.7** – Capability: **6.3**

Historically, the Taliban has openly identified the USG as an enemy and threat to sovereignty, a stance demonstrated by years of targeted attacks against U.S. personnel within Afghanistan.¹¹⁰ The group poses a distinct threat to the U.S. Government (USG) following the strategic vacuum left by the 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan. This shift was tragically underscored by the ISKP-led attack on Kabul airport, which claimed the lives of 13 U.S. service

¹⁰² Ibid. Doxsee, C., Thompson, J., & Hwang, G.

¹⁰³ Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism. (2025). Institute for Economics & Peace. <http://visionofhumanity.org/resources>

¹⁰⁴ Ayaz Gul, "UN: Afghan Taliban Increase Support for Anti-Pakistan TTP Terrorists," Voice of America, July 11, 2024.

¹⁰⁵ "Gunmen Attack U.S. Consulate in Pakistan," Reuters, April 5, 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-attack-idUSTRE6340H220100405>.

¹⁰⁶ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community (Washington, DC, 2025), 34–35.

¹⁰⁷ Director of National Intelligence (2022), Counterterrorism Guide, Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), https://www.dni.gov/nctc/terrorist_groups/ttp.html?utm.

¹⁰⁸ Abdul Sayed, "The Evolution and Future of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 21, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/12/the-evolution-and-future-of-tehrik-e-taliban-pakistan?lang=en>.

¹⁰⁹ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community (Washington, DC: ODNI, 2025), 28, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2025-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

¹¹⁰ Vision of Humanity, Global Terrorism Index 2024, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/global-terrorism-index/#/>.

members.¹¹¹ With its focus now on maintaining power and securing recognition from nations like Russia, China, and the UAE, the Taliban's Will is increasingly defined by a desire for international legitimization rather than transnational terrorism, framing it as a political and diplomatic challenge rather than a kinetic one.¹¹²

The group's Capability has been transformed by its takeover of the state, granting it access to various financial assets and the bulk of the \$7.1 billion worth of equipment left behind by the U.S. military.¹¹³ This seizure of state machinery and military hardware, combined with its consolidated control over the country, represents a significant shift in operational capacity compared to its insurgency era.¹¹⁴

VNSA Findings

- **Mixed Range of Threat:** South Asian VNSAs as part of CENTCOM 2 (Taliban, ISKP, TTP, and Al-Qaeda Core) vary widely in Will and Capability (see Figure 6), creating a diverse but uneven threat landscape to the U.S. homeland.
- **Al-Qaeda Core as the Most Threatening:** Al-Qaeda Core (66.7) poses the highest threat, with maximum Will to strike the United States, though Capability remains moderate due to limited homeland access.
- **Taliban as the Least Threatening:** The Taliban (23.2) represents the lowest threat, seeking political legitimacy rather than direct attacks, though it remains a haven for other jihadist groups.

Analysis

- **Regional Conflicts Enable Extremism:** Political instability, Indo-Pakistani tensions, and ethnic disputes create fertile ground for VNSAs to expand operations and complicate U.S. CT efforts.
- **Partnerships Strengthen CT Efforts:** U.S.-Pakistani intelligence and military cooperation remain critical, exemplified by joint efforts leading to the capture of ISKP operatives.

¹¹¹ Adrienne Kennedy, "Withdrawal of United States troops from Afghanistan (2020–2021)," EBSCO Research Starters in Military History and Science, 2024, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/military-history-and-science/withdrawal-united-states-troops-afghanistan-2020>

¹¹² Smagin, N. (2025, July 10). Russia Is the First Country to Recognize Afghanistan's Taliban Government. Why? Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/07/russia-afghanistan-new-government?lang=en>

¹¹³ Katz, Justin. "In Afghanistan \$7.1 B in Planes, Trucks, Weapons Seized by Taliban Since Withdrawal: DoD Watchdog." Breaking Defense, August 16, 2022. <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/08/in-afghanistan-7-1b-in-planes-trucks-weapons-seized-by-taliban-since-withdrawal-dod-watchdog/>.

¹¹⁴ Smagin, Russia Is the First Country to Recognize Afghanistan's Taliban Government.

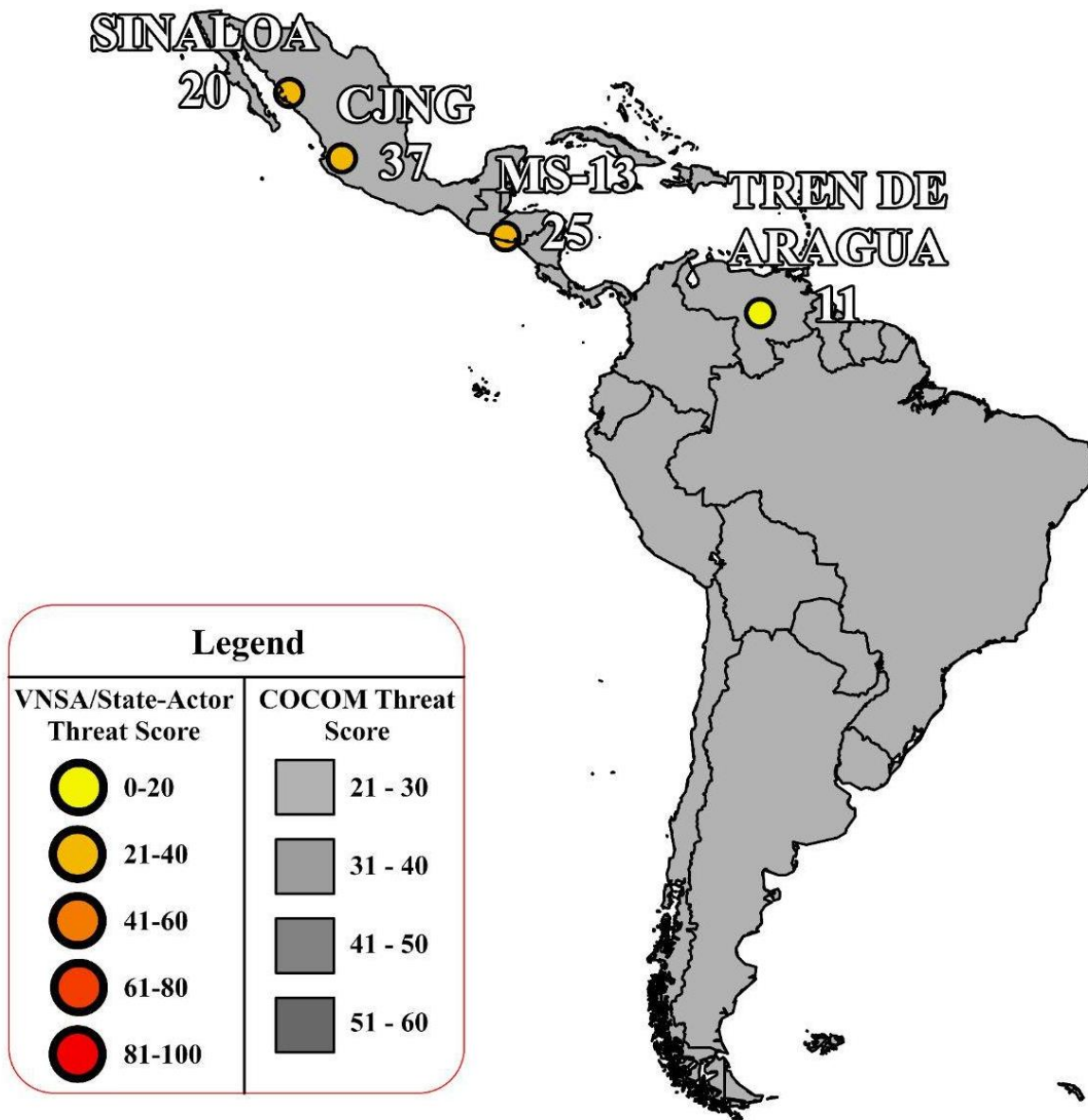
- **Other Emerging Threats:** AQIS is exploiting Taliban control of Afghanistan to expand operations and has explicitly called for attacks on U.S. targets.
- **South Asia as a Complex Threat Environment:** While Taliban and TTP remain regionally focused, ISKP and Al-Qaeda Core sustain credible threats to the United States through propaganda and inspiration of homegrown actors.
- **Al-Qaeda Core's Persistent Hostility:** Despite leadership losses, Al-Qaeda retains maximal hostility toward the United States and is likely to pursue future large-scale attacks if opportunities arise.
- **ISKP's Online and Aspirational Threat:** ISKP continues to incite Western supporters online and aspires to conduct "9/11-style" attacks, posing a persistent homeland concern.
- **Taliban's Political Shift but Enduring Ties:** The Taliban prioritizes international legitimacy but remains unwilling or unable to sever ties with Al-Qaeda, leaving a latent threat to U.S. interests.
- **TTP's Regional Focus with Residual Anti-U.S. Rhetoric:** TTP focuses on Pakistan but retains anti-American narratives that could inspire lone-actor attacks abroad.

Figure 6:
CENTCOM 2 (South Asia) Threat Summary as of August 2025

VNSA Name	Overall Threat Score	Metric	Score	Justification
Al-Qaeda Core	67.0	Will	10.0	AQ Core retains a high will and intent for violent action against the U.S., despite their severely degraded forces due to U.S. operations and strikes. AQ still calls for the death of the U.S. and western nations, seeking to exploit every opportunity to push their agenda further. Encourages attacks against American and other Western targets.
		Capability	6.7	Much like the Islamic State, AQ's losses have crippled its capability to have members of the organization conduct a direct offensive strike against the U.S. However, similar to the Islamic State, AQ still has the ability to inspire attacks that inflict harm to the U.S. homeland, and spread their message.
Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)	63.0	Will	9.0	ISKP is assessed to have a moderate-high will towards the United States and Western interests at large due to being an Islamic State affiliate that harbors anti-U.S. sentiments and seeks to inspire lone wolf attacks in the homeland, but is primarily focused on directly combating the Taliban's regime in Afghanistan.
		Capability	7.0	ISKP is assessed to have a high capability for violence against the United States as the group has conducted significant recent attacks in Iran and Russia, employs suicide bombers with the proven ability to kill dozens, and has a robust global network with branches forming in Africa and Syria; however, the Taliban and regional assets will most likely remain the main victim of ISKP's capabilities.
Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP)	35.0	Will	5.0	The movement retains deep-seated ideological hostility but, since the mid-2010s, its leaders have deliberately deprioritized U.S. homeland plots to focus on overthrowing Pakistan's government and avoiding renewed drone pressure.
		Capability	7.0	Possesses robust personnel, weaponry, and networks; however, its logistical positioning and current priorities constrain near-term U.S. action. Experienced bomb-makers and suicide squads with the capability to execute high-profile attacks. Receives funding from the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.
Taliban	23.3	Will	3.7	The Taliban has historically regarded the United States as an enemy and acted against it, viewing Washington as a threat to Afghanistan's sovereignty. Following the 2021 U.S. withdrawal, however, the group has shifted priorities. Now holding power and governance in Afghanistan, it seeks international recognition and legitimacy from world leaders.
		Capability	6.3	The hasty withdrawal of American troops stationed in Afghanistan allowed the Taliban to obtain weaponry and equipment from the occupying U.S. forces. The Taliban has access to illicit funding and uses Afghanistan as a haven for transnational terrorists. The organization has a large volume of fighters and uses its position as the ruling authority to possess resources and funding that other terrorist organizations do not have.

Regional Threat Assessment

NORTHCOM/SOUTHCOM



COCOM Introduction

NORTHCOM/SOUTHCOM's area of responsibility encompasses areas south of Mexico, the Caribbean Sea, and the coastline of South America.^{115, 116} Within this space lie the epicenters of Latin American TCOs and drug cartels where the most powerful organizations maintain strongholds in Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela, with growing footprints in Chile, Guatemala, Honduras, Peru, and the United States. Compared with VNSAs from Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East, Latin American cartels and TCOs face fewer logistical barriers to infiltrating the United States, contributing to a persistent, proximity-driven risk to the homeland.^{117, 118, 119}

Cartels and TCOs present diverse threats in how they operate, handle perceived threats, maintain territory, and generate revenue. Drug trafficking is the primary vector—sustained by U.S. demand for methamphetamine, heroin, and cocaine—and occurs by land, air, and sea; for example, on 24 July 2025 the U.S. Coast Guard intercepted ~9,970 lbs of cocaine worth \$73.7 million off Ecuador's Coast during Operation Pacific Viper.^{120, 121} Trafficking nodes also enable corruption, human trafficking, and money laundering, while routes are used to smuggle exotic species, weapons, and other contraband; arms flows erode security and fuel violence, and illicit markets rapidly adapt to new drugs and enforcement tactics.¹²² Beyond drugs, human smuggling and trafficking provide additional income streams; clashes with rivals and authorities endanger bystanders; and violence—driven by profit rather than ideology—can be as lethal as terrorism.

¹¹⁵USNORTHCOM. "Our Story: Area of Responsibility," *U.S. Northern Command Official Website*, accessed August 12, 2025, <https://www.northcom.mil/About/>.

¹¹⁶USSOUTHCOM. "Area of Responsibility," *U.S. Southern Command Official Website*, accessed August 12, 2025, <https://www.southcom.mil/About/Area-of-Responsibility/>.

¹¹⁷María Fernanda Arocha and Sandra Pellegrini, "How the Sinaloa Cartel Rift Is Redrawing Mexico's Criminal Map," ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project), May 7, 2025, accessed August 12, 2025, <https://acleddata.com/report/how-sinaloa-cartel-rift-redrawing-mexicos-criminal-map>.

¹¹⁸U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Terrorist Organization Designations of Tren de Aragua, Mara Salvatrucha, Cartel de Sinaloa, Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación, Carteles Unidos, Cartel del Noreste, Cartel del Golfo, and La Nueva Familia Michoacana*, Federal Register 90, no. 28,073 (February 20, 2025), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/02/20/2025-02873/foreign-terrorist-organization-designations-of-tren-de-aragua-mara-salvatrucha-cartel-de-sinaloa>.

¹¹⁹U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, "Designation of International Cartels," press statement, February 20, 2025, accessed August 12, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/designation-of-international-cartels>.

¹²⁰CFR org Editors. Mexico's Long War: Drugs, Crime, and the Cartels." Council on Foreign Relations. February 21, 2025. <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/mexicos-long-war-drugs-crime-and-cartels>

¹²¹USSOUTHCOM. "Coast Guard offloads more than \$74 million in illicit drugs interdicted in the Eastern Pacific". United States Coast Guard News. July 29th 2025. <https://www.news.uscg.mil/Press-Releases/Article/4258314/coast-guard-offloads-more-than-74-million-in-illicit-drugs-interdicted-in-the-e/>

¹²²Interpol, Drug Trafficking, *INTERPOL: International Criminal Police Organization*, accessed August 12, 2025, <https://www.interpol.int/en/Crimes/Drug-trafficking>.

Since 2006, Mexico has seen more than 460,000 homicides following the introduction of the “Kingpin Strategy,” underscoring the scale and persistence of cartel-related violence.^{123, 124, 125}

Group Profiles

Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG)

Overall Threat Score: **37.1** – Will: **5.3** – Capability: **7.0**

While the CJNG's primary Will is driven by economic profit and territorial domination rather than ideological anti-Americanism, the group undeniably harbors hostile sentiment towards the United States. This hostility was notably demonstrated in the 2018 grenade attack on the U.S. Consulate in Guadalajara, an action largely attributed to the cartel.^{126, 127} Although their violence is principally a tool to achieve market supremacy, their willingness to disrupt U.S.-Mexico supply chains and target diplomatic assets signals a dangerous indifference to U.S. interests.

As of 2025, the CJNG possesses a formidable Capability that often outmatches local security forces, employing paramilitary-style tactics, armored vehicles, and drones armed with C4 explosives to seize territory—a level of violence responsible for 80% of cartel-related deaths between 2013 and 2023.^{128, 129} From its inception, the cartel's core strength has been the production of illegal drugs—specifically a multi-billion-dollar trade in fentanyl-laced counterfeit pharmaceuticals—though it also engages in the taxation of commercial goods destined for the United States, posing a direct threat to the broader American economy.^{130, 131, 132}

¹²³Council on Foreign Relations, *Mexico's Long War: Drugs, Crime, and the Cartels*, Backgrounder, last updated February 21, 2025, accessed August 12, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/mexicos-long-war-drugs-crime-and-cartels>.

¹²⁴Esberg, J. "Why Mexico's Kingpin Strategy Failed: Targeting Leaders Lead to More Criminal Groups and More Violence". Modern Institute of War at West Point. June 9th 2022. <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/why-mexicos-kingpin-strategy-failed-targeting-leaders-led-to-more-criminal-groups-and-more-violence/>

¹²⁵U.S. Department of Homeland Security, “Secretary Noem Honors Nicholas Quets, a U.S. Marine Corps Veteran Murdered by the Sinaloa Cartel,” press release, May 28, 2025, accessed August 12, 2025, <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2025/05/28/secretary-noem-honors-nicholas-quets-us-marine-corps-veteran-murdered-sinaloa-cartel>.

¹²⁶ Jones, Nathan P. 2019. “Bacterial Conjugation as a Framework for the Homogenization of Tactics in Mexican Organized Crime.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 44 (10): 855–84. doi:10.1080/1057610X.2019.1586356.

¹²⁷ Sampó, C., Jenne, N., & Ferreira, M. A. (2023). Ruling Violently: The exercise of criminal governance by the Mexican Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG). *Revista Científica General José María Córdova*, 21(43), 647–665. <https://doi.org/10.21830/19006586.1172>

¹²⁸ Cid, A. S. (2025, March 31). The Jalisco New Generation Cartel, In The Line of Fire [Newspaper]. EL PAÍS English. <https://english.elpais.com/international/2025-03-31/the-jalisco-new-generation-cartel-in-the-line-of-fire.html>

¹²⁹Henry Ziemer, "Illicit Innovation: Latin America Is Not Prepared to Fight Criminal Drones," Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 11, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/illicit-innovation-latin-america-not-prepared-to-fight-criminal-drones>.

¹³⁰ U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, *National Drug Threat Assessment 2025*, 202.

¹³¹ June S. Beittel, Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations, no. R41576 (Washington, D.C., 2022), <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R41576>.

¹³² Transnational Criminal Organizations: The Menacing Threat to the U.S. Homeland: Hearing at Subcommittee On Counterterrorism, Law Enforcement, And Intelligence, 2nd Session (2023).

Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13)

Overall Threat Score: **24.5** – Will: **4.3** – Capability: **5.7**

MS-13 presents an elevated risk to the USG, driven by a consistent anti-authority Will and a sustained, violent presence within U.S. borders. Despite lacking an explicit anti-American ideology, the group targets civilians and law enforcement, maintaining a hostile posture toward U.S. institutions.¹³³ Federal indictments have documented this aggression, citing deliberate killings of U.S. informants, threats against police, and attacks on rival gang members on American soil.¹³⁴ While its violence is used primarily as a criminal instrument rather than for political ends, it dramatically undermines law enforcement, community safety, and social stability.

The group's Capability is defined by durable and decentralized cross-border networks that enable it to seek territorial control and commit brutal violence.¹³⁵ MS-13 retains the ability to carry out targeted assassinations, kidnappings, and drug distribution, supported by steady funding avenues including extortion schemes, human trafficking, and money laundering.¹³⁶ These operations are often bolstered by partnerships with larger TCOs like the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG, ensuring a lethal and resilient presence inside the United States.¹³⁷

Cartel de Sinaloa

Overall Threat Score: **20.8** – Will: **2.7** – Capability: **7.7**

The Cartel de Sinaloa's Will is not defined by an express desire to attack the U.S. homeland directly, but rather by financial and territorial ambitions that nevertheless undermine U.S. interests and have claimed countless American lives. The group is primarily motivated by profit and dominance, focusing its intent on maintaining its criminal empire rather than seeking ideological confrontation with the United States.¹³⁸

In terms of Capability, the cartel operates as a sophisticated global enterprise with a presence in 47 countries, generating billions of dollars in illicit revenue as of 2025.¹³⁹ Its resilience is ensured by a vast network of corrupt political, military, and law enforcement officials, alongside a diversified portfolio of criminal activities—ranging from the synthesis of Chinese precursors for fentanyl bound for the United States, pioneered by the “Chapitos” faction, to human smuggling, oil theft, and wildlife trade—that provides considerable funding streams.¹⁴⁰

¹³³ June S. Beittel, Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations, Congressional Research Service, IF10578 (July 25, 2022), 1–2.

¹³⁴ Catarina Doxsee et al., “Chapter 3: The Americas,” in *Global Terrorism Threat Assessment 2024* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024), 23–26.

¹³⁵ Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), *Global Organized Crime Index 2023 – Americas* (October 2023), 12–14.

¹³⁶ Drug Enforcement Administration, “National Drug Threat Assessment 2024,” May 2024.

¹³⁷ International Crisis Group. A Remedy for El Salvador's Prison Fever. Latin America Report No. 96. Brussels: International Crisis Group, October 5, 2022. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/central-america/el-salvador/96-remedy>

¹³⁸ María Fernanda Arocha Pellegrini Sandra, “How the Sinaloa Cartel Rift Is Redrawing Mexico's Criminal Map,” ACLED, May 7, 2025, <https://acleddata.com/2025/05/07/how-the-sinaloa-cartel-rift-is-redrawing-mexicos-criminal-map/>.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ “National Drug Threat Assessment 2024,” May 2024.

This immense wealth, combined with its proximity to the U.S. border, grants the Sinaloa Cartel the logistical capacity to inflict significant harm, even if its strategic goals remain criminal in nature.¹⁴¹

Tren de Aragua (TdA)

Overall Threat Score: **10.8** – Will: **2.3** – Capability: **4.7**

TdA operates primarily as a profit-driven "mega-gang," lacking the ideological motivation of a traditional insurgency. Consequently, the group exhibits a low Will to target the United States, with no declared anti-American sentiment and no active pursuit of U.S. interests.^{142, 143} Harm caused to U.S. persons appears largely incidental to its financially motivated crimes, as its violence has historically stemmed from clashes with rival gangs rather than political targeting.^{144, 145}

Despite possessing limited capabilities relative to major cartels and lacking a consolidated foothold within the United States, TdA maintains a dangerous operational profile. The gang's estimated 5,000 members have demonstrated access to military-grade weaponry; a 2023 raid on their Tocarón prison stronghold yielded sniper rifles, grenades, explosives, and rocket launchers.¹⁴⁶ While its history of brutality is most evident in Latin American turf wars, these assets indicate a latent lethality within the context of organized crime.¹⁴⁷

Overall Findings

- **Overall Scores Range from Moderate to Low:** CJNG ranks highest overall (37.3) on the strength of its relative Will and Capability, followed by Sinaloa (20.4) and MS-13 (24.6), and TdA with the lowest (10.9), indicating a generally lower direct anti-U.S. threat relative to other AORs (see Figure 7).
- **Middle to Very Low Will:** CJNG shows the highest Will (5.3), Sinaloa (2.7) and MS-13 (4.3) remain primarily profit/territory-driven, and TdA (2.3) is opportunistic with minimal explicit anti-U.S. intent. The use of violence chiefly serves as a means for territorial control and profit protection, not ideological targeting of the U.S. homeland.

¹⁴¹ Arocha and Pellegrini, "How the Sinaloa Cartel Rift Is Redrawing Mexico's Criminal Map."

¹⁴² InSight Crime, "Tren de Aragua," last modified June 5, 2025, <https://insightcrime.org/venezuela-organized-crime-news/tren-de-aragua/>.

¹⁴³ Meghna Chakrabarti and Willis Ryder Arnold, "What Is Tren de Aragua? The Criminal Organization's Origins, Activities and Reach within the U.S.," On Point, WBUR, May 13, 2025, podcast, <https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2025/05/13/tren-de-aragua-criminal-organization-origins/>.

¹⁴⁴ Carolina Sampó and Valeska Troncoso, "El tren de Aragua: La transnacionalización del crimen organizado a través del tráfico de migrantes," *Análisis Político* 37, no. 108 (enero-abril 2025): 147–76.

¹⁴⁵ Laura Johnson, "Crossing Borders: The Evolution and Impact of Tren de Aragua," *Small Wars Journal*, June 12, 2025, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/2025/06/12/crossing-borders-the-evolution-and-impact-of-tren-de-aragua/>.

¹⁴⁶ BBC News, "Bitcoin Machines, Rocket-Launchers Seized in Venezuela Prison," BBC News, September 21, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cr421q5zl69o>.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

- **High to Medium Capability:** Sinaloa leads in Capability (7.7), CJNG follows (7.0), MS-13 (5.7) is mid-range, and TdA (4.7) lags, though all possess access to lethal tools and cross-border logistics.
- **Proximity Elevates Risk:** Geographic closeness and established presence in Mexico heighten spillover and access to U.S. markets and infrastructure.

Analysis

- **TCOs/Cartels Newly Designated as FTOs:** U.S. FTO listings for Sinaloa, MS-13, TdA, and CJNG expand legal and policy tools and redefine their threat posture.
- **Cartels Adopting Terrorist Tactics:** Latin American cartels increasingly blur the line between organized crime and terrorism, adopting each other's financing and violence models.
- **Pre-Existing Sanctions and Labels:** All four groups have prior sanctions or TCO/SDGT designations, indicating long-standing U.S. concern and legal groundwork.
- **Potential for Military Action:** A new directive authorizes U.S. military force against cartels, though Mexico warns of sovereignty violations and violence escalation risks.
- **Profit, Not Ideology, Drives Targeting:** Like Sinaloa, MS-13, and TdA, CJNG prioritizes territory, markets, and profit over explicit anti-U.S. ideology.
- **Escalation Likely Under Pressure:** Intensified U.S. crackdowns on trafficking will likely trigger hostile, violent countermeasures.
- **CJNG and Sinaloa as Primary U.S. Threats:** Together, they underpin the fentanyl/meth crisis, pair extreme violence with cross-border distribution, and leverage corruption to sustain scale.
- **MS-13's Resilience Despite Fragmentation:** MS-13's decentralized, U.S.-embedded clique structure preserves operational continuity despite leadership losses and enforcement pressure.
- **Fragmentation Weakens TdA:** Unlike MS-13, TdA's organization has suffered from sustained fragmentation. The group's loose, cell-based configuration and leadership losses increase vulnerability to rivals and state action.

Figure 7:
NORTHCOM/ SOUTHCOM VNSA Threat Summary as of August 2025

VNSA Name	Overall Threat Score	Metric	Score	Justification
Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación	37.1	Will	5.3	While not singularly pre-occupied with anti-U.S. animosity, the CJNG undeniably harbors substantial hostile sentiment towards the United States and stands ready to retaliate if directly confronted, even as its primary objectives remain focused on profit generation and asserting control within Mexico.
		Capability	7.0	CJNG possesses substantial funding, advanced weaponry including armed drones, and a proven track record of significant, coordinated attacks against state forces and U.S. interests within Mexico, suggesting a formidable capacity to inflict serious harm, albeit primarily on a regional scale.
Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13)	24.5	Will	4.3	MS-13 has the intent to commit violence within U.S. borders, but that intent is rooted in criminal enterprise, not ideological hostility toward the United States as a nation-state.
		Capability	5.7	MS-13 possesses significant capability for localized, lethal violence within U.S. borders, but lacks the organizational sophistication or tools required for coordinated, high-impact attacks on critical infrastructure or national targets.
Cartel de Sinaloa	20.8	Will	2.7	The Sinaloa Cartel is primarily driven by profit rather than ideology, its expanding capabilities, targeted violence, and potential designation as a Foreign Terrorist Organization raise growing concerns about a shift toward more overt hostility, especially if provoked by direct U.S. action.
		Capability	7.7	Despite lacking intent to attack the U.S. directly, the Sinaloa Cartel's vast resources, firepower, transnational infrastructure, and demonstrated capacity for large-scale violence make it a highly capable and dangerous organization.
Tren de Aragua	10.8	Will	2.3	Tren De Aragua has minimal hostile intent to attack the United States. The organization will likely seek to maintain regional control in South America and reestablish a central headquarters after losing control of Torocon.
		Capability	4.7	Tren De Aragua has shown the capability to operate effectively across national borders and is suspected to have had over 100 members within the United States. While the organization is currently incapable of launching a large scale mass casualty attack as seen by a TCO such as AQ, the group has shown the ability to infiltrate the United States and effect communities.

Summary of Section Findings

- **Most Threatening VNSA:** The highest Overall Threat Score of the VNSAs investigated was Islamic State - Central.
- **Least Threatening VNSA:** The lowest Overall Threat Score of the VNSAs investigated was Tren de Aragua.
- **An Islamic State Threat Bias:** VNSAs aligned with Islamic State - Central had a 29% higher Overall Threat Score compared to those aligned with Al-Qaeda.
- **Islamic State - Central Groups Are More Operationally Balanced:** Islamic State - Central-aligned VNSAs had high Will and moderate-to-high Capability, while Al-Qaeda-aligned VNSAs had moderate-to-high Will with more variable Capability.
- **AQ Subsidiaries are Weaker but More Geographically Dispersed:** AQ-affiliated groups also seem to have more geographic dispersion than IS-affiliated groups.
- **Highest Will:** The highest Willingness score was earned by Al-Qaida core.
- **Lowest Will:** The lowest Willingness score was earned by Tren de Aragua.
- **Highest Capability:** The highest Capability score was earned by Cartel de Sinaloa.
- **Lowest Capability:** The lowest Capability score was earned by Tren de Aragua.
- **State Support Equates to High Capability:** VNSAs that are aligned with state actors had the highest Capability scores (Cartel de Sinaloa, Houthis, Hezbollah).
- **Salafi-Jihadists Are Geographically Distant, While TCOs Are Closer to the Homeland:** Salafi-Jihadist VNSAs are primarily focused in the AFRICOM and CENTCOM AORs, while TCOs are more prevalent in the NORTHCOM/ SOUTHCOM AORs, closer to the U.S.
- **TCOs and Non-affiliated Jihadist VNSAs Generally the Most Capable:** The most capable non-affiliated jihadist and TCOs had higher Capability scores than IS/AQ-aligned VNSAs.

Section One: Conclusion

This section utilized a comprehensive threat-scoring approach that individually scored Will, Capability, and Overall Threat. This methodology revealed key strategic trends in the overall threat environment, such as a persistent and strong anti-U.S. sentiment in CENTCOM VNSAs, growing influence of Salafi-jihadist VEOs in Africa, and a disproportionate Capability of TCOs such as the Sinaloa Cartel to damage the U.S. homeland.

COCOM Overviews

- **AFRICOM:** As of August 2025, the AFRICOM AOR poses a relatively low threat of attacking the U.S. homeland, as its VNSAs are mainly concerned with establishing regional control and do not have the capabilities of attacking the U.S. homeland directly. However, its complex geopolitical environment poses a high likelihood that it will serve as the breeding ground for future Islamic extremist groups, as well as state and non-state actor collusion, and therefore will require a high level of oversight by the United States.
- **CENTCOM 1: MIDDLE EAST:** Despite the degradation of Islamic State - Central and Al-Qaeda, the Middle East region within the CENTCOM 1 AOR poses the biggest threat to the U.S. homeland. Anti-U.S. sentiment persists, and regional VNSAs maintain a strong yet decentralized online presence that has a proven track record of motivating lone actor attacks within the United States. Despite its currently weakened state, Islamic State - Central poses the biggest threat within this region. With the impending withdrawal of coalition forces and the political turmoil following the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria, Islamic State - Central is in a prime position to rebuild and must be heavily surveilled to avoid a repeat of the 2014 establishment of a caliphate that followed the 2011 withdrawal of troops from the region.
- **CENTCOM 2: SOUTH ASIA:** Although South Asian VNSAs within the CENTCOM AOR have high Will and Capability scores, they have experienced major shifts in power dynamics as the Taliban vies for recognition as the governing body of Afghanistan. While groups like ISKP maintain persistent anti-U.S. sentiment and an active online presence, they have reoriented much of their efforts toward challenging Taliban rule. Al-Qaeda has found haven in Taliban-controlled areas, yet remains unable to mount an attack directly on the homeland. These groups continue to generate regional instability; however, their distance from the United States and the Taliban's newfound counterterrorism efforts will most likely diminish the overall threat the United States faces from VNSAs in this region.
- **NORTHCOM/ SOUTHCOM:** As of August 2025, the NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM AORs present a distinct homeland threat. Unlike the distant Salafi-jihadist VNSAs previously discussed, its TCOs operate in close geographic proximity to the United States and are not ideologically driven but rather profit-motivated criminal organizations whose business practices lead to far more casualties than any VEO-led attacks in recent history. The sheer violence and deaths caused by these groups, both within the United States and

south of the border, in addition to potential collusion with state actors, pose a major threat to the U.S. homeland.

Comparative Analysis

- **CENTCOM 1 Earned the Highest Threat Score:** As of August 2025, VNSAs within CENTCOM – Middle East pose the greatest threat to the U.S. homeland as their enduring anti-U.S. rhetoric is reinforced by continued U.S. involvement in the region. U.S. support of Israel against Hamas and the U.S. bombing of Iranian nuclear facilities have been continually framed by Islamic Extremist groups as U.S. oppression of Islam. These potential threats were realized in the days after the U.S. bombing of Iran, as DHS warned the country of potential attacks on the homeland from lone actors. The threat of Iran-backed VNSAs in combination with the potential for Islamic State - Central to reconstitute in Syria will continue to drive the CENTCOM threat environment.
- **Cartels Pose Greatest Homeland Threat—Despite CENTCOM Score:** While the CENTCOM - Middle East AOR ranks as the highest theoretical threat due to its combined Will and Capability scores, the cartels within the NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM AORs inflict the most concrete and measurable damage to the U.S. homeland. NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM consistently identify these groups as the top priority, and the sheer volume of their drug, weapon, and human smuggling confirms they represent the most acute danger. In addition, their recent move of drug operations to Africa leaves the door open for collusion between African VNSAs, state-actors, and cartels. Despite not being ideologically motivated, the financially motivated cartels would be easily convinced to potentially smuggle VEO cells or WMDs on behalf of VEOs into the United States.
- **Islamic State - Central Aligned Groups Pose the Biggest Threat Amongst Ideologically Motivated VNSAs:** Across all of our COCOMS, ideologically motivated VNSAs that were aligned with Islamic State - Central consistently scored higher Will and Capability scores than those aligned with AQ. Islamic State - Central's establishment of a caliphate in 2014 was most likely a main contributor to this metric. Not only did they establish a worldwide network of supporters, but they held control of an unprecedented amount of land for several years until their downfall. The thousands of Islamic State - Central fighters sitting in prison add to their reserve of fighters and pose a significant risk and contribute to the elevated risk of them recapturing Syria after coalition forces withdraw from the region. Overall, the group's persistent anti-U.S. ideology, grievances with the United States for breaking apart their caliphate, and its worldwide network of supporters contribute to its affiliates posing a higher risk than AQ affiliates.
- **Converging Boundaries Between State and Non-State Actors:** One of the most important takeaways from our analysis is that the threat environment the U.S. homeland is facing continually blurs the lines between the traditional binary posture the United States held: viewing state and non-state actors, or TCOs and VEOs, as separate concerns or threats. A primary example of this phenomenon is the collusion between the Mexican government and cartels. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that there are police,

lawmakers, and government officials at all levels who have been corrupted by the cartels. Considering the new categorization of cartels as VEOs, the United States has allowed itself to use more of its resources to fight cartels, but this will be made increasingly difficult because it will also have to carefully manage relationships with government officials. In addition, we see the transition of the Taliban from one of the U.S. primary VNSA threats to a political entity vying for recognition. This shows that the threat environment cannot wholly be described by Will and Capability or any other simple metrics, as it misses out on much more complex factors like collusion between state and non-state actors or between non-state actors.

Section Two

Contemporary State Threat Assessment

Introduction

In section one, we examined the threat environments posed by international VNSAs, as of August 2025, in four major COCOMs/regions: AFRICOM, CENTCOM – Middle East, CENTCOM – South Asia, and NORTHCOM/SOUTHCOM. Section two aims to rigorously assess the threat posed by state actors, in the same capacity we have previously analyzed VNSAs, using this report’s comprehensive Will and Capability scoring metrics. This analysis provides a critical comparative baseline, allowing us to contextualize the severity of non-state threats by measuring them against the strategic and kinetic capabilities of the nation’s primary state adversaries.

Research Questions

In this section, we will utilize the same scoring metrics to further explore **state actors’** contributions to the contemporary threat environment by answering **three** main research questions:

- As of mid-2025, which state actor poses the greatest threat to the U.S. homeland?
- How do these state actors compare in terms of their Will and Capability to harm the United States?
- How do regional alliances and geopolitical realignments among state actors amplify state-based threats to the homeland?

Methodology

The methodology in this section mirrors that of the regional/COCOM threat assessments by using the same Will and Capability matrix to conduct our analysis. In this section, however, we study the four leading state actors (China, Iran, Russia, and North Korea) across various regions.

It is important to note that the very nature of these state actors having established governments, full-sized militaries, and unfettered access to considerable funding, heavily skews their capabilities to the top of our threat matrix, despite there being substantial differences within each state actor’s capabilities. Another limitation posed by our scoring metric is the way Will is defined regarding direct attacks on the United States. State actors, such as China, may pose a strategic threat, but are not particularly willing to strike the United States directly, as it would lead to all-out war. Instead, these states, for the most part, seek to subvert U.S. influence around the world or engage in proxy conflicts.

Layout

This section provides an analysis of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea and presents the core findings, relevant trends, and distinctions identified across each of these state actors. The assessments aim to capture the Will, Capabilities, and objectives of each state actor, providing a comprehensive look at the threat posed and overall risk to the U.S. homeland.

State Threat Assessment

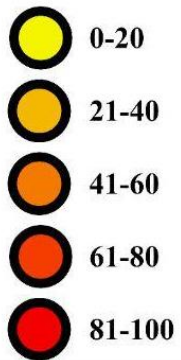
CHINA

Overall Threat Score: 80.0 – Will: 8.0 – Capability: 10.0



Legend

State-Actor Threat
Score



General Overview

Over the past two decades, China has emerged as a primary strategic competitor to the United States, fundamentally reshaping the global threat environment. Beijing now pursues regional dominance and global influence through military modernization, coercive diplomacy, and strategic partnerships with Russia, Iran, and North Korea.¹⁴⁸ This shift from collaboration to competition has transformed China into a state actor actively challenging the U.S.-led international order and expanding the complexity of global security dynamics. As the “pacing threat,” China presents both a strategic and tactical challenge to the United States. Its regional gains through ‘gray-zone tactics’ do not pose a direct threat to the U.S. homeland but rather lead to regional instability, which can enhance its authoritarian governance style and inspire anti-U.S. sentiment in the VNSAs within the INDOPACOM AOR.¹⁴⁹ The potential for China to collude with cartels and African VNSAs, while continuing to exploit the continent for natural resources and expand economic and political influence, also poses a significant threat to the U.S. homeland. China can leverage African VNSAs and anti-U.S. regimes, along with its continued interest in expanding naval ports in Africa, to discourage U.S. involvement in the region.¹⁵⁰ In addition, although China is unlikely to mount a full-scale offensive against the U.S. homeland, its military and technological advancements rank it as one of the most capable state actors. A direct attack from China would most likely occur through cyber operations that undermine critical U.S. infrastructure and, as a result, pose a threat to life and property in the homeland.¹⁵¹

State Profile

China represents the U.S.’ pacing threat, demonstrating the Will to harm U.S. interests through strategic competition and economic coercion. China has repeatedly used “gray-zone” tactics to continue to push the envelope of strategic competition without undertaking direct kinetic action against the United States. Although China has not shown the intent to attack the U.S. homeland, it has shown the willingness to displace the U.S. as a global superpower and corrode its global influence.¹⁵² A prime example of this is the \$1.3 trillion Chinese-funded Belt and Road Initiative used to expand its influence in Asia and Africa by investing in critical domains such as transportation, energy, and mining of various metals. This effort has also further deepened CRINK alliances and cooperation. The first half of 2025 represents the highest 6-month period of investment (\$57.1 billion) from China into the BR&I, which signifies an

¹⁴⁸Phillip C. Saunders and Melodie Ha, “Chinese Military Diplomacy,” *Institute for National Strategic Studies, China Strategic Perspectives*, vol. 19 (June 2025), <https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1019&context=china-strategic-perspectives>.

¹⁴⁹Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *ATA 2025*.

¹⁵⁰Zenn, Jacob. “China Sets Sight on Gabon for Second African Military Base.” *T2COM G2 Operational Environment Enterprise (OE Watch)*, February 15, 2025. Accessed January 10, 2026. <https://oe.tradoc.army.mil/product/china-sets-sight-on-gabon-for-second-african-military-base-2/>

¹⁵¹U.S. Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2022), <https://permanent.fdlp.gov/gpo188301/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

¹⁵² Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *ATA 2024*.

invigoration of competition with the U.S. and renewed efforts to become the world superpower.¹⁵³

In terms of Capability, the People's Liberation Army has transformed its near-peer force with over 500 operational nuclear warheads (projected to exceed 1,000 by 2030), hypersonic missiles, and advanced anti-access/area denial systems spanning the South China Sea.¹⁵⁴ This focus on operational readiness, along with its \$309 billion defense budget and control of over 85% of the global rare-earth processing, exemplifies its strength and autonomy.¹⁵⁵ In addition to its staggering kinetic capabilities, China has also heavily invested in its cyber capabilities, namely through the development of the Volt Typhoon campaign, which has enabled China to strategically pre-position itself within key critical IT infrastructure. This effort underpins the Chinese strategy to build its capabilities and influence without partaking in direct conflict with the United States.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Wang, Christoph Nedopil. 2025. "China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2025 H1 – Green Finance & Development Center." Greenfdc.org. July 17, 2025. <https://greenfdc.org/china-belt-and-road-initiative-bri-investment-report-2025-h1/>.

¹⁵⁴ International Crisis Group, Asia in Flux: The U.S., China and the Search for a New Equilibrium.

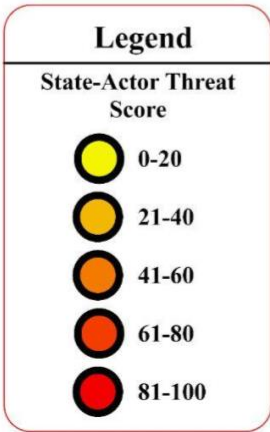
¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ The Operational Environment 2024-2034: Large-Scale Combat Operations, TRADOC Pamphlet nos. 525–92 (U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, 2024.), <https://oe.tradoc.army.mil/product/the-operational-environment-2024-2034-large-scale-combat-operations/>.

State Threat Assessment

RUSSIA

Overall Threat Score: 77.0 – Will: 7.7 – Capability: 10.0



General Overview

Russia remains one of the most capable and enduring adversaries to U.S. national security interests. It maintains the ability to strike the U.S. homeland with both ballistic and nuclear weapons, and its constant submarine presence in the Arctic and off the Alaskan coast further enhances that capability.¹⁵⁷ The Kremlin's global posture is supported by three interconnected pillars: hybrid warfare, global proxy influence, and great-power alignment. Through these, Russia continues to advance a revisionist vision that challenges Western power and undermines U.S. influence worldwide. Its utilization of the Wagner Group in Africa to promote Russian interests and disrupt U.S. operations stands as a clear example of state and non-state convergence.¹⁵⁸ Despite the group's primary focus on counterterrorism operations rather than coordination with violent non-state actors, its presence, combined with Russian propaganda in the region, increases anti-U.S. sentiment and complicates U.S. strategic competition.

State Profile

Russia demonstrates a persistent Will to challenge U.S. national security interests, favoring high-impact, deniable actions that advance its strategic objectives.¹⁵⁹ Russian state media and online disinformation networks, including the Internet Research Agency, continue to polarize U.S. political discourse and undermine confidence in democratic institutions.¹⁶⁰ At the same time, Russia's cooperation with China, Iran, and North Korea strengthens its economic and geopolitical resilience, signaling a continuing commitment to challenging Western power structures.¹⁶¹ Beyond these alliances, Moscow increasingly employs aggressive "gray zone" tactics, including cyber operations against critical infrastructure and global sabotage campaigns targeting Western logistics.¹⁶² These efforts are underpinned by a modernized nuclear arsenal and a conventional military posture designed to deter U.S. intervention in regional conflicts.¹⁶³ Ultimately, the Kremlin leverages these capabilities to advance a revisionist vision that challenges Western power structures, undermines U.S. global influence, and secures Russia's position through great-power alignment.¹⁶⁴

From an operational standpoint, Russia's Capability to harm the U.S. homeland is reinforced by a hybrid approach that blends cyber information and electronic warfare with traditional military modernization. GRU-linked actors such as APT28 (Fancy Bear) and Sandworm have conducted major intrusions, including the 2016 U.S. election interference and

¹⁵⁷The Asia Live News Service, "Russia's Naval Expansion in Arctic: Satellite Imagery Reveals Significant Submarine Deployment," The Asia Live, March 21, 2025.

¹⁵⁸The Soufan Center, The Wagner Group and Beyond: Proxy Private Military Companies, November 1, 2022.

¹⁵⁹ ODNI, Annual Threat Assessment, 2025.

¹⁶⁰ U.S. Department of Justice, Justice Department Disrupts Covert Russian Government-Sponsored Foreign Malign Influence Operation Targeting Audiences in the United States and Elsewhere, September 4, 2024.

¹⁶¹ Stuart Lau, "CRINK: It's the New 'Axis of Evil,'" Politico, October 17, 2024.

¹⁶² ODNI, Annual Threat Assessment, 2025.

¹⁶³ Michael Kofman and Katya Migacheva, The Future of the Russian Military, RAND Corporation, 2023.

¹⁶⁴ Stuart Lau, "CRINK: It's the New 'Axis of Evil,'" Politico, October 17, 2024.

the 2021 Colonial Pipeline attack.¹⁶⁵ The Wagner Group and other private military companies extend Russian influence across Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, supporting Kremlin goals through resource acquisition and regime protection.¹⁶⁶ Despite ongoing losses in Ukraine, Moscow maintains a standing army of approximately 1.13 million active personnel, the world's largest nuclear stockpile of roughly 5,580 warheads, and a diverse naval fleet of nearly 300 active units.^{167, 168, 169} These assets allow it to continue to modernize its nuclear triad and develop hypersonic and electronic warfare systems, preserving its deterrence posture and ensuring that Russia remains a persistent multidomain threat to U.S. national security.

¹⁶⁵ Michael Kofman and Katya Migacheva, *The Future of the Russian Military*, RAND Corporation, 2023.

¹⁶⁶ U.S. Army TRADOC G-2, *The Operational Environment 2024–2034*, July 2024.

¹⁶⁷ International Institute for Strategic Studies. "Russia and Eurasia." In *The Military Balance 2025*. London: Routledge, 2025. <https://www.iiss.org/publications/the-military-balance/2025/russia-and-eurasia/>.

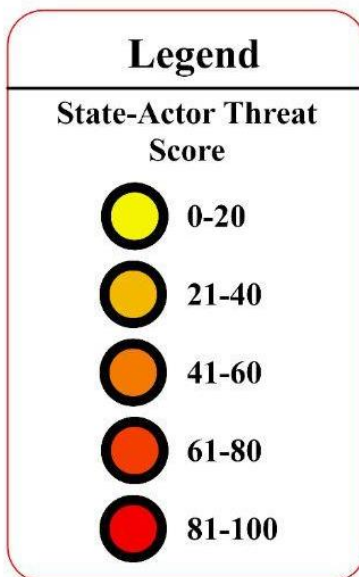
¹⁶⁸ Hans M. Kristensen et al., "Russian Nuclear Forces, 2024," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 80, no. 2 (2024): 118–144, <https://fas.org/publication/russia-nuclear-notebook-2024/>.

¹⁶⁹ Andrew Monaghan, "Russia's Naval Futures: New Horizons 2050," *Outlook*, no. 11 (November 2025). https://www.ndc.nato.int/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/2025_outlook_11.pdf.

State Threat Assessment

IRAN

Overall Threat Score: 56.2 – Will: 7.3 – Capability: 7.7



General Overview

Beyond the Middle East, Iran threatens the U.S. homeland by combining military power with high-tech drones and missiles. By using its “Axis of Resistance” proxy network, Iran actively works to undermine U.S. objectives abroad.¹⁷⁰ Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has been governed by a Shi’a theocracy with an explicitly anti-American ideology. The regime portrays the United States as a corrupting influence and a strategic threat to its sovereignty, religious identity, and regional aspirations. This ideological hostility permeates Iranian political rhetoric and strategic documents and informs its continued pursuit of asymmetric options to confront U.S. influence in the Middle East and beyond.¹⁷¹ Since 1984, Iran has been identified as a state sponsor of terrorism and, for the last several decades, has overtly codified and continued its ties and support of terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah, the Houthis, Hamas, the al-Ashtar Brigades, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.¹⁷²

State Profile

Iran demonstrates a heightened Will represented by its overt hostility, allegiance with violent non-state actors in the region, and sponsorship of terrorism. The Quds Force, a component of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps of Iran, was designated a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the United States in 2019 under the Trump Administration.¹⁷³ The Quds Force and the IRGC have been directly tied to and involved in the planning and execution of terrorist plots and attacks around the globe. Iran's IRGC has been linked to interrupted terrorist plots and attempted attacks in Germany, Bosnia, Kenya, Turkey, and even the United States.¹⁷⁴ In 2011, the United States thwarted an IRGC plan to attack the Saudi Ambassador while on a visit to the United States.¹⁷⁵

With respect to Capability, Iran poses the lowest state-actor threat to the U.S. homeland despite its recent attacks on U.S. air bases in the Middle East as a response to the U.S. bombing of their nuclear bases.¹⁷⁶ Its failure to inflict significant damage, even on targets in close proximity, combined with the ineffectiveness of their ICBMs against Israeli defenses bolstered by U.S. systems, suggests that Iran lacks the Capability to carry out a direct kinetic strike on the U.S. Homeland.¹⁷⁷ Prior to its recent degradation, Iran possessed one of the largest and most diverse ballistic missile arsenals in the Middle East.¹⁷⁸ It continues to develop precision-strike capabilities and long-range delivery systems that can threaten U.S. assets across the region. Its

¹⁷⁰Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (Washington, DC: ODNI, 2025), 15-22.

¹⁷¹Ibid. ODNI, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, 2025.

¹⁷²“Designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps,” *United States Department of State* (blog), April 8, 2019, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/designation-of-the-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps/>.

¹⁷³ “Designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps,” *United States Department of State* (blog), April 8, 2019, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/designation-of-the-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps/>.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. “Designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.”

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. “Designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.”

¹⁷⁶ ODNI, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, 2025.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

drone program, frequently deployed by proxies in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, is becoming more lethal, accurate, and exportable.¹⁷⁹ These systems increase Iran's ability to escalate or retaliate without formal war declarations.¹⁸⁰ Lacking the conventional military power to match U.S. forces, Iran has adopted an asymmetric strategy centered on proxy warfare, missile proliferation, and gray-zone tactics.¹⁸¹ This includes backing non-state actors like Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis, and multiple Iraqi Shi'a militias to exert influence and pressure regional adversaries. Iran uses these groups to strike U.S. allies and interests while avoiding direct confrontation and maintaining plausible deniability.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ Central Intelligence Agency, "Iran: Military and Security," CIA World Factbook, July 2025, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/iran/#military-and-security>.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

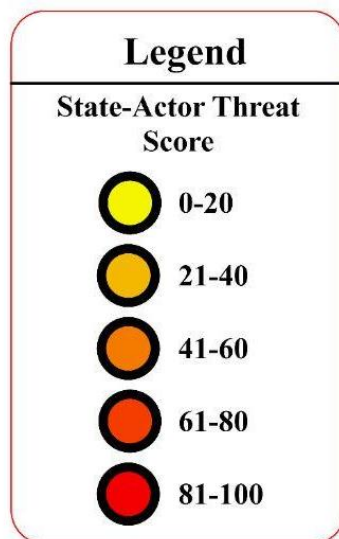
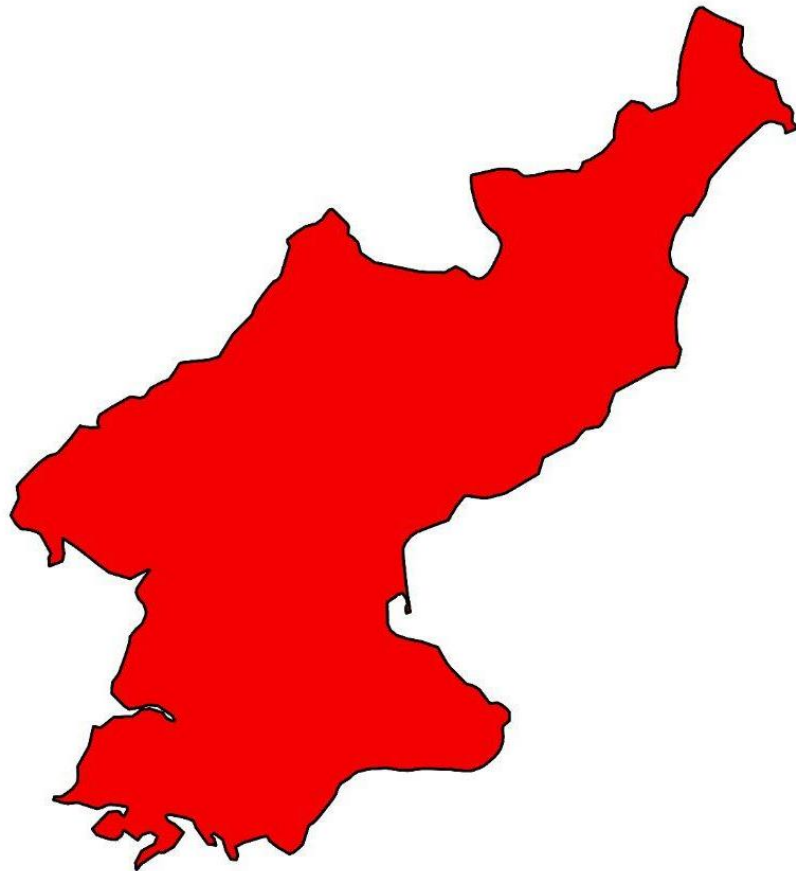
¹⁸¹ RAND Corporation, Iran's Proxies: Axis of Resistance and the Threat to U.S. Interests (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2020), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4337.html.

¹⁸² Ibid.

State Threat Assessment

NORTH KOREA

Overall Threat Score: 83.7 – Will: 9.3 – Capability: 9.0



General Overview

North Korea, officially the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), emerged in 1948 following the division of the Korean Peninsula after World War II and has since been ruled by the Kim family under an autocratic, one-party regime.¹⁸³ The state’s status as a closed society, economic hardship following the fall of the Soviet Union, and persistent U.S. military presence in South Korea have fueled its deep anti-American sentiment and pursuit of self-reliance through militarization, as the regime considers the U.S. an “imperialist aggressor.”¹⁸⁴ Over the past two decades, North Korea has expanded its nuclear and ballistic missile programs despite international sanctions and nonproliferation efforts, positioning itself as a persistent and destabilizing threat to regional and global security. Kim Jong Un has called South Korea “our principal enemy” and announced an official change of national interest away from eventual unification with the South, the regime’s official *raison d’être* since its founding.¹⁸⁵ Since 1988, North Korea has intermittently been designated by the United States as a state sponsor of terrorism, most recently being reinstated in 2017 as a result of its failure to address historical support for international terrorism.¹⁸⁶ Since 2022, North Korea has taken steps to strengthen its relationship with Russia by supplying aid in the form of artillery shells and ballistic missiles, and most recently sending 11,000 troops to join in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.¹⁸⁷

State Profile

North Korea’s entrenched anti-U.S. posture remains a central pillar of its state narrative, demonstrating a high Will to challenge the United States. This posture has been leveraged to unify its population around a perceived external adversary and justify the regime’s militarization and strategic policies. A prime example is the state-run serials in the *Rodong Sinmun* (Labour Newspaper) which routinely provide graphic details about the massacres, sexual assaults, etc., allegedly committed by UN forces. These publications have included anti-U.S. rhetoric such as “we will certainly have our revenge on the American muggers.”¹⁸⁸ In September of 2024, Kim Jong-un vowed to “redouble its measures and efforts to make all the armed forces of the state including the nuclear force fully ready for combat.”¹⁸⁹ In June 2025, a North Korean spokesperson denounced the U.S. bombing of Iranian nuclear facilities as a violation of the

¹⁸³U.S. Relations With North Korea, U.S. Department of State, archived site covering 2017–2021, accessed April 2025, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-north-korea/>

¹⁸⁴Shobhit Seth. (2024) "Why North Korea Hates the U.S." <https://www.investopedia.com/articles/investing/032515/why-north-korea-hates-us.asp>

¹⁸⁵Hyung-Jin Kim (2024) calls South Korea a principal enemy as his rhetoric sharpens in a U.S. election year. <https://apnews.com/article/north-korea-kim-rhetoric-tensions-6806461cb93ab62d81c06d5f7922d3d0>

¹⁸⁶U.S. Department of State, (2019) Country Reports of Terrorism 2019: Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/democratic-peoples-republic-of-korea/>

¹⁸⁷Hrytsenko, A. (2025). North Korea is using Russia’s Ukraine invasion to upgrade its army. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/north-korea-is-using-russias-ukraine-invasion-to-upgrade-its-army/>

¹⁸⁸Taewoo Kim, “Actualized Stigma: The Historical Formation of Anti-Americanism in North Korea,” *Modern Asian Studies* 51, no. 3 (May 2017): 543–76, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X15000396>.

¹⁸⁹Kim Tong-Hyung, “North Korea’s Kim vows to make his nuclear force ready for combat with U.S.,” Associated Press, September 9, 2024, accessed July 27, 2025.

nation's sovereignty and called on other countries to "reject" the actions of the United States and Israel.¹⁹⁰

As far as Capability, the most significant marker is North Korea's nuclear and ballistic arsenal and testing. The DPRK has managed to accumulate enough nuclear material to make around 90 nuclear warheads, but has only made around 50.¹⁹¹ It has also tested six nuclear weapons between 2006 and 2017, the most recent of which was a hydrogen bomb. A confidential 2017 Intelligence Assessment also concluded that North Korea has the ability to miniaturize nuclear warheads to fit on ICBMs.¹⁹² In addition to kinetic capabilities, North Korea has a proven track record of conducting effective cyber-attacks all around the world. Its most infamous cyber threat actor is a group known as 'Lazarus', which is held responsible for the spread of the WannaCry ransomware in 2017. In addition, a UN report found that North Korea had stolen more than \$2 billion through cybercrime as of 2019.¹⁹³ Recently, a North Korean intelligence official was charged with hacking critical networks such as NASA, military bases, and hospitals.¹⁹⁴ These advancements in cyber capabilities exemplify that U.S. adversaries do not require kinetic capabilities in order to inflict violence on the U.S. homeland.

¹⁹⁰ Reuters, "North Korea condemns U.S. strike on Iran as violation of sovereign rights, KCNA reports," Reuters, June 23, 2025, accessed July 27, 2025.

¹⁹¹ Mary Beth D. Nikitin, North Korea's Nuclear Weapons and Missile Programs, CRS In Focus IF10472 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, May 23, 2025), accessed July 27, 2025.

¹⁹² David Martin, "North Korea Can Now Make Missile-Ready Nukes, Intelligence Assessment Finds," CBS News, August 8, 2017, accessed July 27, 2025.

¹⁹³ Council on Foreign Relations, "What Are North Korea's Military Capabilities?" Council on Foreign Relations, accessed July 27, 2025.

¹⁹⁴ Eric Tucker, "U.S. Disrupts North Korean Hackers That Targeted Hospitals," Associated Press, July 25, 2024, accessed July 27, 2025.

Overall Findings

- **North Korea – Highest Overall Threat:** With an Overall Threat Score of 83.7 (Will: 9.3, Capability: 9.0), North Korea combines entrenched anti-U.S. ideology with advancing nuclear, ballistic, and cyber programs, creating the most immediate and multidimensional escalation risk to the homeland.
- **China – Pacing Threat:** China, with its Overall Threat Score of 80.0 (Will: 8.0, Capability: 10.0), demonstrates unmatched military, technological, and economic capability. It leverages A2/AD systems, modernization, and global supply chain dominance to pressure the United States through cyber and information operations rather than direct kinetic engagement.
- **Russia – Acute Multidomain Threat:** Russia possesses an Overall Threat Score of 77.0 (Will: 7.7, Capability: 10.0) as it maintains strategic pressure through nuclear modernization, hybrid warfare, global proxy use, and sophisticated cyber activity that collectively strain U.S. political, military, and civil infrastructure.
- **Iran – Persistent Regional Threat:** Iran scores lowest among state actors with an Overall Threat Score of 56.2 (Will: 7.3, Capability: 7.7) but sustains the most active proxy network. The regime relies on ballistic missiles, UAVs, and cyber operations to indirectly coerce U.S. and allied interests while preserving plausible deniability.
- **State Capability vs. VNSA Capability:** State actors (average Overall Threat Score of 9.18) significantly surpass VNSAs (average Overall Threat Score of 6.0) in Capability and tend to employ cyber operations, information warfare, and proxies rather than direct kinetic attacks on the homeland (see Figure 8).
- **Collusion Amplifies Threat Potential:** Informal CRINK cooperation and state–VNSA linkages enable technology transfer, intelligence sharing, and resource exchange while concealing attribution, heightening the likelihood of deniable, coordinated operations within CENTCOM and INDOPACOM theaters.

Analysis

- **North Korea Represents the Most Immediate Escalation Risk:** North Korea’s extreme anti-U.S. ideology, combined with advanced nuclear, ballistic, and cyber capabilities, makes it the most unpredictable and potentially destabilizing state actor. Its willingness to engage in provocative actions, including missile testing and offensive cyber operations, heightens the risk of rapid escalation that could indirectly threaten the U.S. homeland.
- **China and Russia Prioritize Persistent, Non-Kinetic Competition:** China and Russia continue to rely on cyber operations, disinformation campaigns, and economic coercion to weaken U.S. influence without direct confrontation. These actions target U.S. critical infrastructure and democratic institutions, signaling a deliberate shift toward long-term, below-threshold conflict that avoids conventional war.
- **CRINK Cooperation Strengthens Collective Resilience Against the United States:** The growing collaboration between China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea creates a strategic partnership that allows each to offset individual weaknesses. Through shared technology, weapons transfers, and coordinated information campaigns, this bloc reduces the impact of Western sanctions and presents a unified challenge to U.S. global leadership.

- **Proxy and Cyber Campaigns Enable Plausible Deniability:** State actors increasingly use proxies, militias, and cyber networks to attack U.S. interests indirectly while maintaining plausible deniability. These actions blur the line between state and nonstate aggression, complicating attribution and reducing the likelihood of an immediate U.S. military response.
- **State Involvement in Africa and the Indo-Pacific Expands Indirect Threats:** Chinese and Russian investments and security operations in Africa and the Indo-Pacific weaken U.S. influence and strengthen anti-U.S. narratives. These activities create permissive environments for violent non-state actors to grow and indirectly increase the risk of extremist attacks targeting U.S. interests abroad and at home.
- **Attribution Delays Undermine U.S. Response Readiness:** The convergence of state, proxy, and criminal networks complicates intelligence attribution, allowing adversaries to exploit bureaucratic and legal barriers that slow U.S. decision-making. These gaps reduce deterrence effectiveness and give adversaries greater freedom to operate below open conflict thresholds.
- **Homeland Defense Requires Adaptation to Hybrid Threats:** The combination of high state Capability, proxy involvement, and cyber pressure requires a shift from traditional deterrence toward integrated resilience. U.S. homeland defense efforts should prioritize faster attribution, improved interagency coordination, and robust cyber defenses to mitigate state-sponsored hybrid operations that originate overseas but impact the homeland.

Section Two: Conclusion

The state-led threat landscape reflects an evolution from conventional warfare to persistent hybrid competition, where economic pressure, cyber campaigns, and proxy conflict replace direct confrontation. North Korea, China, Russia, and Iran each demonstrate distinct methods of challenging U.S. power, but they increasingly operate along a shared continuum of strategic behavior.

North Korea poses the most volatile and immediate escalation risk due to its nuclear development, entrenched anti-U.S. ideology, and disregard for international norms. However, its self-containment limits its global reach, whereas China's economic dominance, technological advancement, and expanding influence in Africa and the Indo-Pacific make it the most consequential long-term challenger to the United States. Russia's hybrid operations and Iran's proxy networks further expand the range of threats the United States must contend with, both directly and through nonstate intermediaries.

Through this analysis, one consistent pattern has emerged wherein state-sponsored cyber threat actors are being used to inflict tangible damage on critical U.S. infrastructure. These operations provide plausible deniability and allow adversaries to degrade U.S. resilience without provoking open conflict. Growing cooperation among states within the CRINK alignment has amplified this effect by enabling technology sharing, coordinated disinformation, and mutual circumvention of sanctions.

These developments blur the boundary between state and nonstate aggression, creating a single continuum of threat that merges state ambition with nonstate violence. Examples include Russia's use of the Wagner Group in Africa, Iranian sponsorship of Hamas and the Houthis, and potential Chinese coordination with transnational criminal organizations.

Figure 8:
State Actor Threat Summary as of August 2025

VNSA Name	Overall Threat Score	Metric	Score	Justification
North Korea	83.7	Will	9.3	North Korea possess maximum will to attack the U.S. homeland because it maintains a deeply entrenched anti-U.S. ideology, rooted in historical grievances and reinforced by state propaganda, while leveraging strategic ties with China, Russia, and limited cooperation with Iran to bolster its military posture.
		Capability	9.0	North Korea has access to nuclear, chemical, and biological warfare (CBW), with delivery systems able to reach the U.S., its large military, increasingly dangerous cyber capabilities and its deepening relationships with Iran, Russia, and China.
China	80.0	Will	8.0	China demonstrates an extreme willingness to harm U.S. interests through a comprehensive strategic displacement that includes active cyber pre-positioning against critical infrastructure, aggressive military modernization designed to defeat U.S. forces regionally, economic coercion, and influence operations aimed at undermining American global leadership.
		Capability	10.0	China possesses maximum capability to harm the United States through its combination of nuclear weapons, sophisticated cyber operations pre-positioned against critical U.S. infrastructure, long-range precision strike capabilities that can reach the U.S. homeland, and comprehensive state-level military resources.
Russia	77.0	Will	7.7	Russia exhibits a very high will for violent actions against the U.S., driven by entrenched geopolitical rivalry and ideological hostility, through indirect, asymmetric means. Russian state narratives consistently depict the United States as a primary adversary actively undermining Russian sovereignty and international status.
		Capability	10.0	Russia possesses maximum capability for executing violent actions against the U.S. homeland, supported by extensive nuclear and advanced conventional arsenals alongside sophisticated cyber capabilities, past success in attacking U.S. critical infrastructure. Though geographic distance, attribution risks, and domestic constraints limit its ability to conduct large-scale kinetic attacks on the U.S. homeland.
Iran	56.2	Will	7.3	Iran exhibits a strong anti-American and anti-Western sentiment as a result of enduring opposition to Western and American influence in the region, within Iran, and U.S. involvement in Iranian authority and the backing of its regional adversaries. While Iran has not publicly stated that it intends to attack the U.S. homeland, the nation is known to publicly support terrorist organizations that attack U.S. personnel within the region.
		Capability	7.7	Prior to recent degradation, Iran possessed an and extensive arsenal of weapons and equipment and maintains a robust special forces organization known to engage in and perpetrate terrorist attacks in the region, and around the globe. They have demonstrated their willingness to attack U.S. interests and personnel abroad. Utilizes conventional forces, advanced missile and drone arsenals, cyber capabilities, and a robust network of proxy militias.

Section Three

VNSA and State Comparison and Collusion

Introduction

In this section, we provide a dual-focused assessment that first compares the unique threat profiles of international VNSAs and state actors and then analyzes the nature of the convergence between them. Our prior analysis explored the Will and Capability of both groups to target the U.S. homeland. While comparing these profiles establishes an essential baseline for the report, the findings indicate that these metrics alone do not fully capture the overall capacity of an actor to function in a hybrid landscape. Therefore, we move beyond individual threat metrics to investigate how instances of VNSA and state collaboration reshape the operational environment. These trends are a defining characteristic of our current threat environment and have allowed our adversaries to erode U.S. global influence at a pace not seen in recent decades. The United States can no longer assess non-state and state actors in a vacuum because their growing interdependence reinforces that regional instability abroad directly amplifies the risk to U.S. homeland security.

Research Questions

This section aims to answer **three** main research questions:

- How do the threats posed by international VNSAs compare to those from state actors such as China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea (CRINK)?
- To what extent are state actors colluding or capable of colluding with VNSAs to advance their strategic goals without engaging in direct conflict with the United States?
- To what extent does collusion between state actors and international VNSAs shape the severity of these threats?

VNSA–State Comparative Analysis

- **Ideological VNSAs Rival States in Will:** While states dominate in Capability, Figure 10 reveals that VNSAs frequently surpass state actors in Will. Al-Qaeda Core and Islamic State-Central achieved Will scores of 10.0 and 9.7, respectively, exceeding even the most hostile state actor, North Korea (9.3). This data highlights a fundamental difference in how these actors approach conflict. State actors like China (Will: 8.0) and Russia (Will: 7.7) generally operate within a framework of strategic competition and rational deterrence, seeking to displace U.S. power without inviting a direct conventional war. In contrast, Salafi-jihadist VNSAs operate on ideological imperatives that prioritize long-term survival and regional control, yet they maintain a persistent willingness to conduct mass-casualty attacks when such actions align with their broader strategic goals. While these groups are highly resilient, their "Will" to target the homeland is most acute at the core ideological level, whereas decentralized nodes may deprioritize international strikes in favor of local dynamics and power struggles. Thus, the U.S. faces a paradox where the actors with the greatest capacity to damage the homeland (States) are often less immediately willing to pull the trigger than the actors with less capacity (VNSAs).

- **State Actors Retain Dominance in Capability:** As illustrated in Figure 9, there remains a distinct Capability gap between state actors and VNSAs. CRINK states possess an average Capability score of 9.18, significantly outpacing the VNSA average of 6.0. This disparity is driven by the state’s monopoly on advanced conventional militaries, nuclear arsenals, and sophisticated cyber-warfare infrastructure. While groups like the Sinaloa Cartel (Capability: 7.7) and Hezbollah (Capability: 7.3) rival states in specific asymmetric domains—specifically the mastery of complex global smuggling routes and the capacity to wage sustained conventional warfare—they lack the nuclear deterrence, global power projection, and economic sovereignty that defines the CRINK alliance. Consequently, while VNSAs can inflict severe localized or asymmetric damage, state actors retain the unique ability to launch large-scale, coordinated strikes that can fundamentally destabilize the United States.
- **State and Non-State Threat Dynamics:** The intersection of Will and Capability, seen in Figures 11 and 12, generally places state actors in the upper-right quadrant, designating them as the highest tier of threat. This distribution reflects the ability of state actors to project power across multiple theaters while VNSA threats remain largely contained within specific regions (see Figure 13). However, the data highlights a critical anomaly regarding Iran. With an Overall Threat Score of 56.2, Iran ranks lower than Islamic State-Central at 67.7 and the Houthis at 58.4. This inversion challenges the assumption that nation-states inherently pose a greater threat than non-state actors and suggests that a highly motivated VNSA can present a more acute risk than a state actor constrained by diplomatic maneuvering. A contrasting phenomenon appears with high-Capability criminal groups like the Sinaloa Cartel that score low on the overall threat index solely due to a lack of political Will. This position on the matrix masks the potential danger these groups would pose if they ever aligned ideologically with a CRINK adversary.

VNSA–State Collusion Findings

- **Iran-CENTCOM I VNSAs:** Amongst the CRINK alliance, Iran has consistently had the highest collusion with VNSAs across various combatant commands. Iran’s most influential collaborations exist within the CENTCOM I AOR and include (but are not limited to) VNSAs such as the Houthis, Hamas, and Hezbollah. These evolving partnerships have bolstered the VNSA’s operational capabilities and served to amplify Iran’s political and military arm in the Middle East and across the globe. The Houthis have been Iran’s “primary benefactor” and have received weaponry, advanced drone technologies, and intelligence allowing them to project power and interrupt global shipping lanes running through the Red Sea.¹⁹⁵ The U.S. Dept. of State has estimated that Iran has given upwards of \$700 million a year and has also contributed a major portion of its arsenal of 100,000 rockets.^{196,197} Tehran’s facilitation of safe havens and financial channels for Al-Qaeda and its warming relationship with the Taliban further expand the

¹⁹⁵Robinson, Kali. “Iran’s Support of the Houthis: What to Know.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 24, 2025. <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/irans-support-houthis-what-know>.

¹⁹⁶Lane, Ashley. “Iran’s Islamist Proxies in the Middle East.” *Wilson Center*, September 12, 2023. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/irans-islamist-proxies>

¹⁹⁷ul Haq, Irfan. “Iran and Hezbollah: Proxy Power Play.” *Institute for Security & Development Policy (ISDP)*, March 26, 2024. <https://www.isdp.eu/iran-and-hezbollah-proxy-power-play/>

network of VNSAs it can leverage against U.S. interests. These alliances have transformed CENTCOM I VNSAs into some of the most powerful non-state actors, capable of generating significant security and economic disruptions, increasing risk to the U.S. forces and offering a dangerous collaboration model for others to imitate.

- **China-NORTHCOM/SOUTHCOM/Potential AFRICOM VNSAs:** As our ‘pacing threat,’ the possibility of Chinese-VNSA collaboration is particularly dangerous to the U.S. Homeland and, more broadly, to the global security landscape. There is limited openly available evidence of collaboration between China and VNSAs, but a high potential for future collaboration given China’s involvement in various regions of the world. However, China is uniquely positioned to leverage VNSAs more than any other in the CRINK alliance due to its gray-zone tactics and financial investments in various regions of the world. Although direct evidence remains limited, China’s extensive economic engagement in Africa through the BRI and FOCAC places it in close proximity to the “epicenter of terrorism.” This strategic positioning, combined with exploitative practices across the continent, creates potential risks for the U.S. homeland and could negatively influence U.S. perception of the continent and, in turn, deter U.S. involvement on the continent. Chinese chemical suppliers and laundering networks underpin the Sinaloa Cartel’s fentanyl and meth production. Although there is no overt connection between the Chinese government and South American VNSAs, their inaction to prevent the movement of fentanyl precursor chemicals out of the country can be seen as passive complicity.
- **Russia-African/NORTHCOM and SOUTHCOM VNSAs:** Russia has not been found to have any direct ties to VNSAs in any of the aforementioned COCOMS. Despite these findings, Russia holds a unique identity within the continent because of its use of the Wagner Group for CT efforts. Russia’s utilization of the Wagner Group in Africa to advance Russian interests and challenge U.S. military presence in the region serves as one of the most apparent examples of state and non-state collusion on the African continent. Despite Russia’s Wagner group mainly partaking in CT operations and not directly collaborating with other VNSAs, its presence significantly complicates U.S. strategic competition in the region. Wagner Group’s presence, in addition to the pervasiveness of Russian propaganda in the region, increases the anti-U.S. sentiment in the region. It could potentially push the many regionally focused VNSAs to aspire to attack the U.S. homeland. Russia also possesses strong cyber capabilities and has been known to fund various cyber campaigns against Western logistics networks and other critical infrastructure.¹⁹⁸
- **CRINK/Unaffiliated Cyber Groups:** State and non-state actors are becoming increasingly reliant on the cyber domain as a method for inducing harm on the U.S. homeland. In this new era centered around technological developments, social media networks, AI advancements, etc., the U.S. homeland is facing an increasingly pertinent cyber risk. The development of these proxy cyber capabilities and information campaigns amplifies pressure on U.S. interests, raises the risk from lone actors, and complicates

¹⁹⁸Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency et al., “Russian GRU Targeting Western Logistics Entities and Technology Companies,” *Cybersecurity Advisory* AA25-141A, May 21, 2025, accessed August 4, 2025.

deterrence below the threshold of open conflict. Iran has helped advance Houthi and Hezbollah cyber capabilities through the training of Houthi-aligned cyber groups such as “OilAlpha” and “GuardZoo” and by aiding Hezbollah with the standup of a counterintelligence cyber unit and the development of its custom Explosive RATS functionality.^{199, 200, 201} A Chinese satellite company, Chang Guang Satellite Technology, has been providing the Houthis with imagery to help them target U.S. ships in the Red Sea.²⁰² Outside of the VNSAs discussed in this report, states in the CRINK alliance have relied heavily on unaffiliated cyber groups to serve as plausibly deniable sources of cyber-attacks. For example, Iran has leveraged a cyber group named “CyberAv3ngers” which has focused on industrial control systems and has targeted U.S. oil and gas firms, amongst other critical infrastructure.²⁰³ Russia has heavily invested in expanding its cybercrime network, of which a group named “NoName057(16)” has carried out 1,500 distributed denial-of-service attacks (DDoS) against NATO-aligned countries in its attempt to destabilize the U.S. and its allies.²⁰⁴

- **Collusion Comes in Many Forms:** Collaboration between VNSAs and state actors appears in many forms, posing varying degrees of risk to the U.S. Homeland. VNSA and state actor collusion can be overt, exemplified by Iran's enduring ties and support of terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah and the Houthis, enhancing the groups' operational capabilities while simultaneously leveraging them as proxies for strategic geopolitical objectives. Collaboration can also occur in less visible or indirect settings, such as the documented connections between Chinese criminal networks, Chinese-based chemical companies, and the Sinaloa Cartel.
- **Complicates the Threat Environment:** VNSA and state actor collusion trends and findings challenge the longstanding USG assumption that state and non-state threats are fundamentally distinct and can be managed independently. Yet today's dynamic threat environment indicates that they cannot be regarded as separate; they must instead be treated as a single continuous threat spectrum. State-VNSA collusion blurs the lines between the traditional binary posture the U.S. held, complicating the broader threat

¹⁹⁹VeriTech Consulting, “Houthi Cyber Activities: A Deep Dive into Threats and Influence Operations,” March 17, 2025, accessed November 27, 2025, <https://www.veritech.consulting/houthi-cyber-activities-a-deep-dive-into-threats-and-influence-operations/>

²⁰⁰Benjamin R. Young, “How Iran Built Hezbollah into a Top Cyber Power,” *The National Interest*, April 11, 2022, accessed November 27, 2025, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/techland/how-iran-built-hezbollah-top-cyber>

²⁰¹Atlantic Council, “The 5x5—The State of Cybersecurity in the Middle East,” June 15, 2021, accessed November 27, 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/the-5x5/the-5x5-the-state-of-cybersecurity-in-the-middle-east/>

²⁰²Brandon J. Weichert, “Is a Chinese Satellite Firm Helping the Houthis Target U.S. Ships?” *The National Interest*, April 22, 2025, accessed November 27, 2025, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/is-a-chinese-satellite-firm-helping-the-houthis-target-u-s-ships>

²⁰³Andy Greenberg, “CyberAv3ngers: The Iranian Saboteurs Hacking Water and Gas Systems Worldwide,” *Wired*, April 14, 2025, accessed November 27, 2025, <https://www.wired.com/story/cyberav3ngers-iran-hacking-water-and-gas-industrial-systems/>

²⁰⁴Julia Dickson and Emily Harding, “How a Cyber Alliance Took Down Russian Cybercrime,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, July 28, 2025, accessed November 28, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-cyber-alliance-took-down-russian-cybercrime>

landscape and geopolitical climate.

Section Three: Conclusion

This section's comparative analysis reveals a distinct strategic dichotomy: state actors possess a decisive advantage in Capability, leveraging conventional and nuclear strength that no non-state actor can match, whereas ideologically driven VNSAs frequently exhibit a higher Will to attack the U.S. homeland. This creates a paradox where the adversaries with the greatest capacity to destroy are constrained by deterrence, while those with the most fervent intent lack the means to inflict existential harm.

To bridge this gap, State and VNSA collusion has become a central mechanism through which adversarial states advance strategic influence while avoiding direct, attributable confrontation with the United States. These partnerships allow state actors to outsource risk to proxies and criminal intermediaries. Iran remains the most prolific operator in this space, sustaining Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Hamas with weapons, funding, training, intelligence, and cyber support that enable attacks on Red Sea shipping and persistent pressure on U.S. forces and partners. Russia's utilization of private military companies such as the Wagner Group in Africa serves as a primary example of collusion where Russian-backed formations challenge U.S. presence and help cultivate environments in which anti-U.S. sentiment can grow. China's extensive economic engagement in Africa expands Beijing's leverage and proximity to terror epicenters, while PRC-based chemical suppliers and Chinese laundering networks underpin the production and financing of fentanyl and methamphetamine by cartels such as Sinaloa. Furthermore, reporting that Chinese satellite companies have provided imagery to the Houthis illustrates how these relationships can produce direct security effects.

These patterns directly shape the severity of the threat to the U.S. homeland in ways that Will and Capability scores alone cannot fully capture. In the CENTCOM AOR, Iranian backing has turned Hezbollah and the Houthis into some of the most capable VNSAs in the world, magnifying their ability to threaten U.S. forces, regional partners, and global commerce, while offering a scalable model of proxy warfare that other states may seek to emulate. In NORTHCOM/SOUTHCOM, cartels may register lower Will scores than ideologically driven terrorist organizations, but their access to Chinese precursors, Chinese and other laundering networks, and permissive environments produces one of the most acute direct impacts on U.S. public health and safety through mass overdose deaths. In AFRICOM, Russian security footprints and Chinese economic expansion converge with weak governance to create a lattice of opportunities for future state-VNSA collusion and potential radicalization. Across all theaters, state-aligned cyber and information actors, some formally state-directed and others operating as deniable proxies, further complicate attribution and provide additional tools for disrupting U.S. critical infrastructure.

Taken together, the findings from this section indicate that the most consequential risks do not arise from isolated states or VNSAs assessed in a vacuum but from interconnected ecosystems in which states, proxies, criminal organizations, and cyber groups reinforce one another. State-VNSA collusion injects state resources into flexible, deniable actors that can operate below the threshold of open war and help galvanize anti-U.S. sentiment and radicalization, including potential lone actor violence. This combined system boosts VNSA

capabilities, broadens their operational reach into maritime, cyber, and transnational criminal domains, and creates new pathways for low-attribution attacks and societal harm inside the United States. As a result, an effective homeland security strategy must treat state and non-state threats as a continuous spectrum shaped by collusive relationships, must integrate collusion dynamics alongside Will and Capability in threat assessments, and must recognize that regional instability abroad now directly amplifies the risk to U.S. homeland security.

Figure 9:
Overall Threats Score of VNSAs and State Actors to the United States as of August 2025

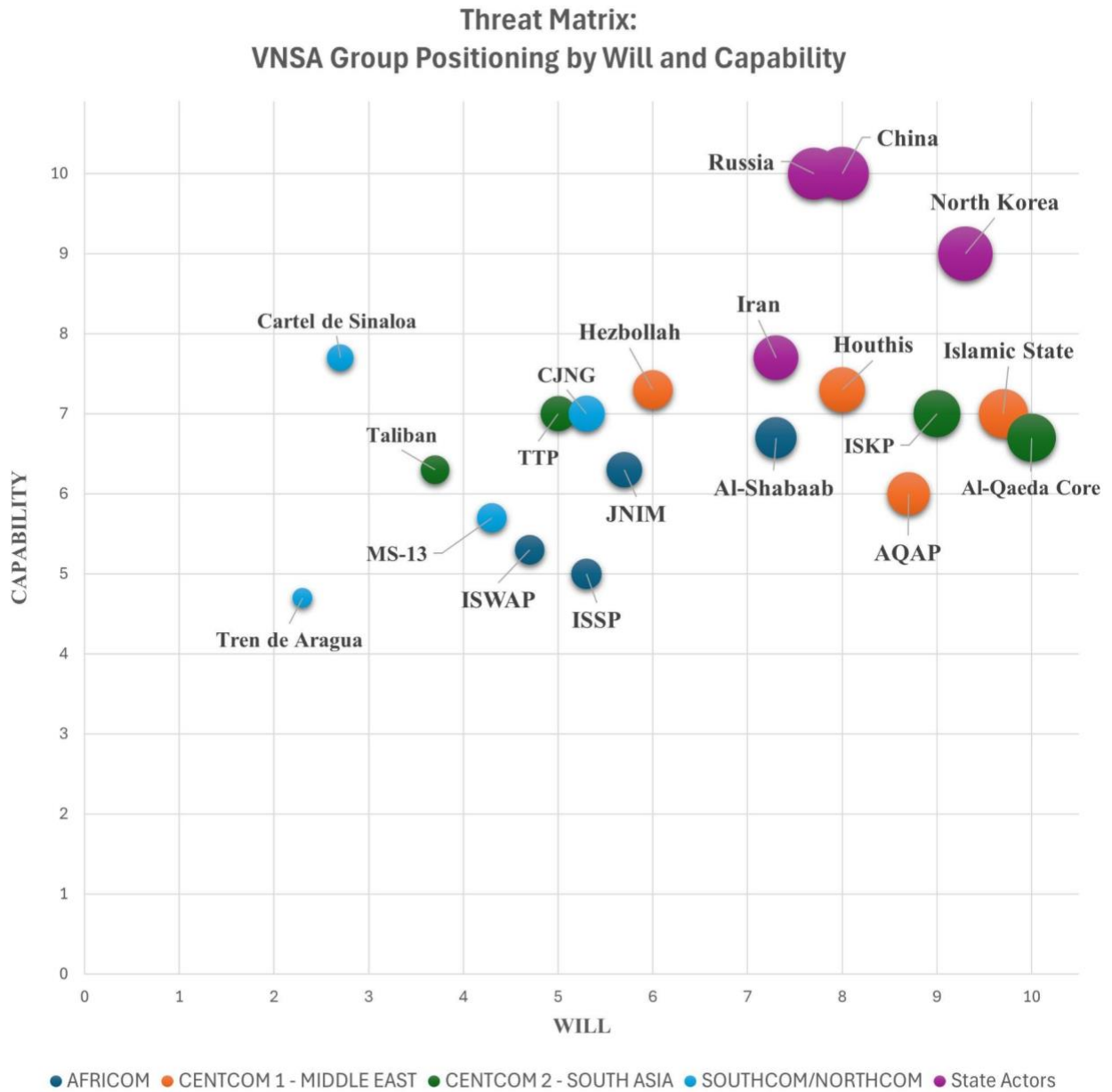


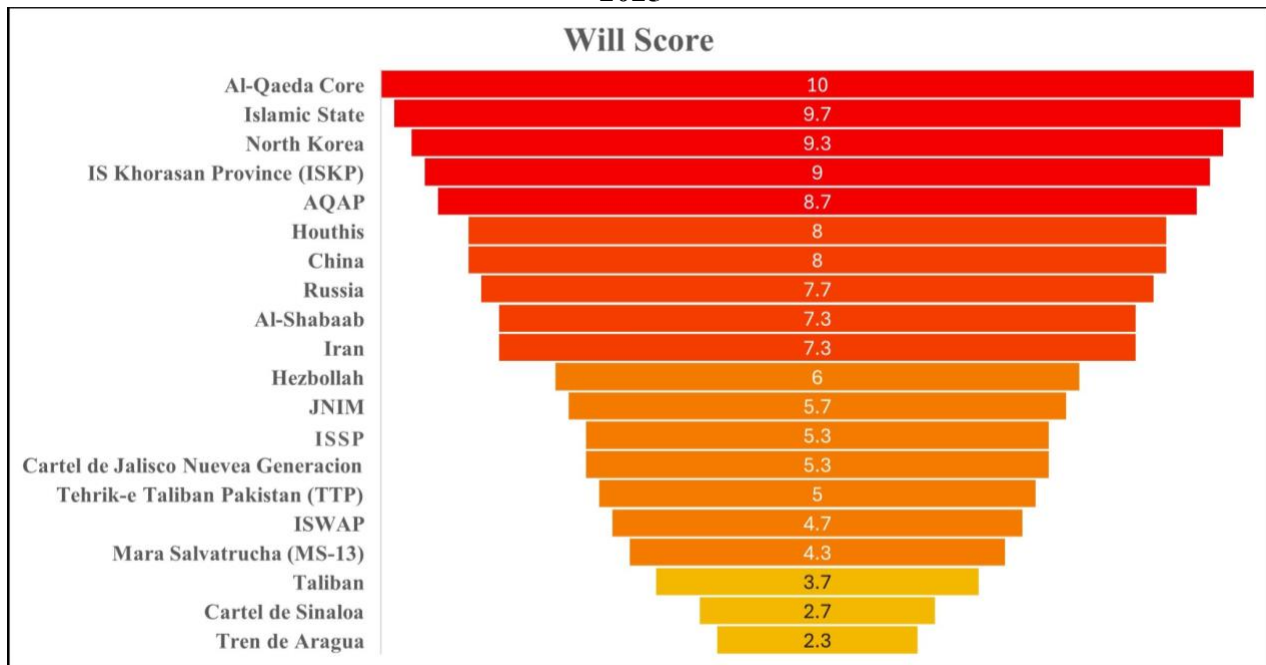
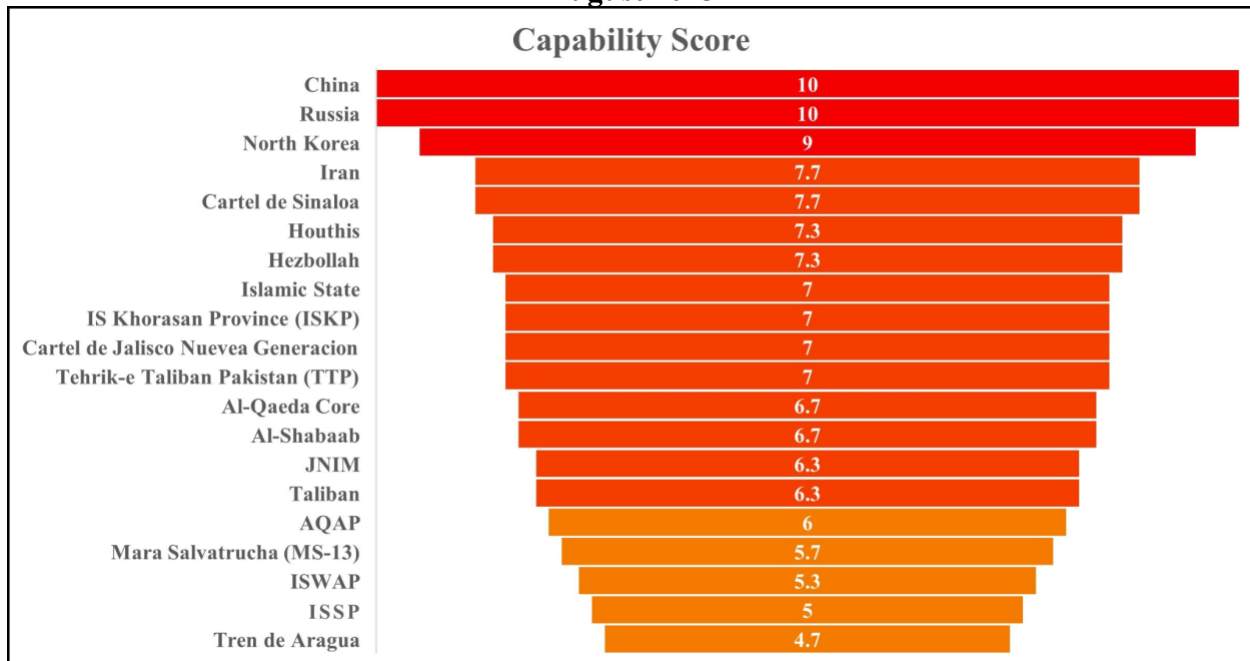
Figure 10:**Average VNSA and State-Actor “Will” Scores to Attack the U.S. Homeland as of August 2025****Figure 11:****Average VNSA and State-Actor “Capability” Scores to Attack the U.S. Homeland as of August 2025**

Figure 12:**VNSA and State-Actor Will and Capability Scoring**

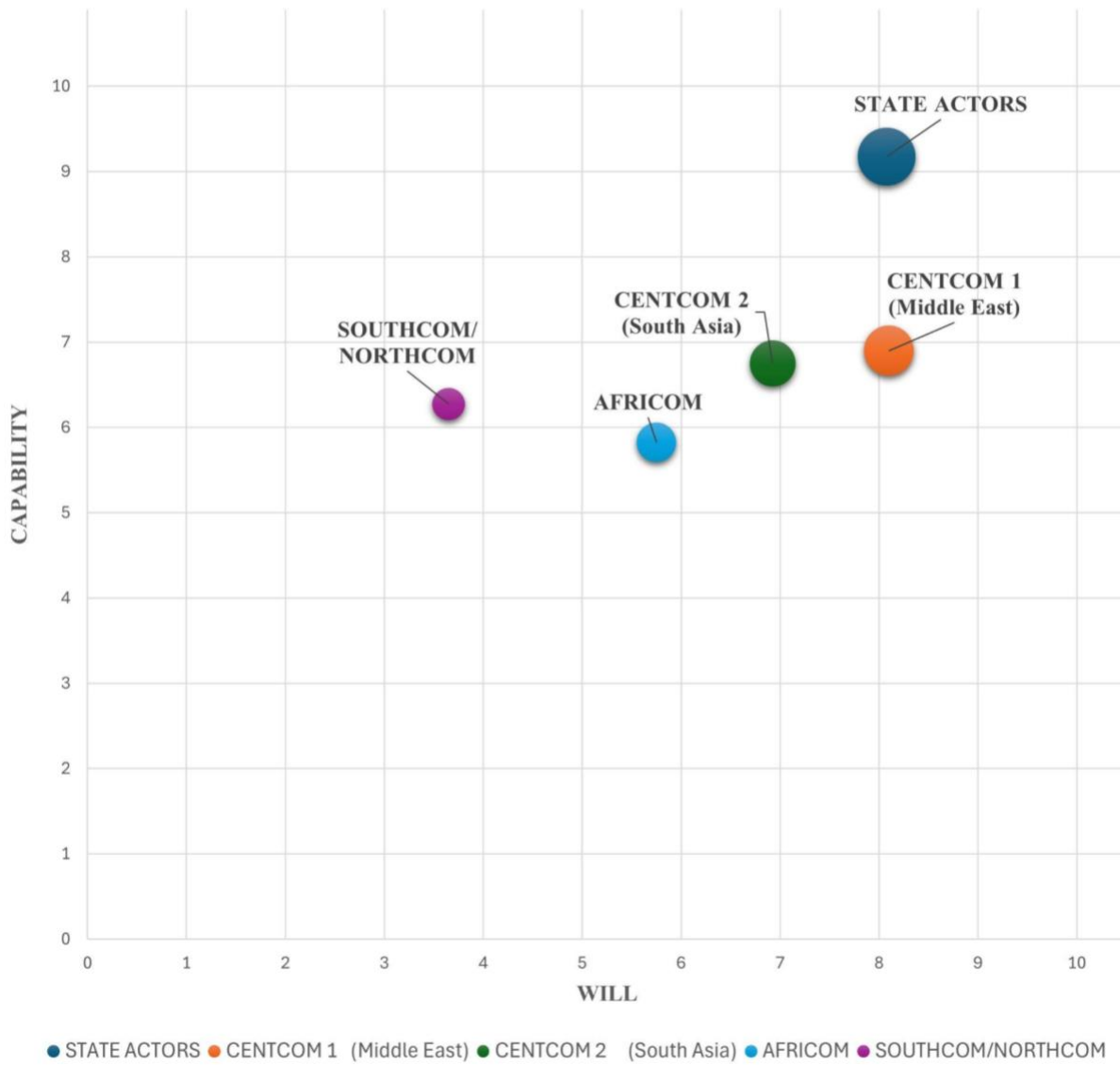
Group	Will	Capability	Threat Score
North Korea *	9.3	9.0	83.7
China *	8.0	10.0	80.0
Russia *	7.7	10.0	77.0
Islamic State	9.7	7.0	67.9
Al-Qaeda Core	10.0	6.7	67.0
IS Khorasan Province (ISKP)	9.0	7.0	63.0
Houthis	8.0	7.3	58.4
Iran *	7.3	7.7	56.2
AQAP	8.7	6.0	52.2
Al-Shabaab	7.3	6.7	48.9
Hezbollah	6.0	7.3	43.8
Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generacion	5.3	7.0	37.1
JNIM	5.7	6.3	35.9
Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP)	5.0	7.0	35.0
ISSP	5.3	5.0	26.5
ISWAP	4.7	5.3	24.9
Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13)	4.3	5.7	24.5
Taliban	3.7	6.3	23.3
Cartel de Sinaloa	2.7	7.7	20.8
Tren de Aragua	2.3	4.7	10.6

* State Actor

Figure 13:

Overall Average VNSA and State-Actor Threat Score by Combatant Command as of August 2025

**Threat Matrix:
Regional Positioning by Will and Capability**



Section Four

Conclusion

Recap of Project, Method, and Findings

Over the past thirty years, U.S. threat assessments have shifted from an almost exclusive focus on jihadist terrorism after 11 September 2001 to an environment in which near-peer state competition again occupies center stage. This report reconciles those perspectives by evaluating the full spectrum of violent non-state actors, including foreign terrorist organizations, violent extremist organizations, and transnational criminal organizations, and by systematically comparing them with traditional state actors. Conducted as a partnership between Pennsylvania State University's Homeland Security graduate program and T2COM G2, the effort engaged graduate researchers to develop detailed profiles of sixteen VNSAs across four regions, plus four state actors, and to analyze how U.S. Government policy and perceptions evolved from the 1990s to 2025.

Methodologically, the cohort of students conducted open-source research within a defined fourteen-week window and applied a common metric to assess the Will and the Capability of international VNSAs and state actors to harm the U.S. homeland. Each actor received a Will score from zero to ten reflecting its ideological or strategic desire to harm the United States and a Capability score on the same scale representing its demonstrated ability to cause harm. Scores were assigned using detailed guidelines and averaged across analysts to reduce bias. Multiplying those values produced an Overall Threat Score from zero to one hundred, enabling standardized comparison across insurgent cells, criminal syndicates, extremist networks, and sovereign militaries.

The principal findings show that the contemporary threat environment is highly hybrid in nature. No single actor type outranks the others across all dimensions of risk. Instead, disparate actors operate in fluid, mutually reinforcing networks. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps equips proxy militias with drones and missiles that enable harassment of U.S. forces while preserving state-level deniability. Conversely, Mexican cartels, once viewed through a narcotics lens, now employ paramilitary tactics that rival insurgent organizations in lethality and local territorial control. The traditional hierarchy that placed jihadist terrorism above criminal networks has collapsed into a continuum of hybrid warfare.

These conclusions align with the report's theses: the mix of state and nonstate threats is unprecedented, the current landscape is defined by hybrid cooperation between them, and such adversaries demand integrated rather than siloed responses.

Implications for Army Readiness and Operations

Army and joint doctrine historically addressed counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and conventional warfare in separate doctrinal frameworks. Today, battlefield modalities blend. A single formation may counter drone-delivered explosives from a cartel-affiliated cell, support a partner nation's response to cyber sabotage, and contribute to deterrence against a peer state in a contested maritime zone. The Army remains vulnerable to asymmetric attacks by nonstate actors even as peer competitors present high-end conventional and nuclear risk. Criminal enterprises may lack explicit ideological aims yet impose strategic scale harm on the homeland through synthetic opioids and associated violence. These realities indicate a persistent requirement for

multi-domain readiness, interagency intelligence sharing, and rehearsed civil-military coordination, while preserving the Army's ability to deter and fight state adversaries. Understanding these dynamics also requires situating VNSAs within the broader competitive landscape. While some nonstate actors can cause national-level harm that changes U.S. policy and priorities, the comparative capabilities of state adversaries set the outer limits of threat planning.

Comparison with State Actor Threats

China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea possess capabilities far beyond any international VNSA, yet the distinction between these actor types is increasingly defined by how they bridge the gap between intent and capacity. Our comparative analysis reveals a stark divide where state actors maintain a dominant average Capability score of 9.18 compared to the VNSA average of 6.0. This disparity reflects the state monopoly on nuclear arsenals, global power projection, and economic sovereignty, which allows them to pose existential threats that no criminal or terrorist network can match. However, this dynamic is inverted regarding political Will. Ideologically driven VNSAs frequently register higher intent scores than their state counterparts because they operate on imperatives of survival and radicalization rather than rational deterrence.

This creates a strategic paradox where the actors with the greatest capacity to harm the homeland are often the least immediately willing to take decisive action due to the risks of conventional war. VNSA–State collusion has emerged as the primary method for resolving this tension. Adversarial states now leverage irregular forces, private military companies, cyber contractors, and proxy militias to harness the high-will aggression of nonstate actors while maintaining plausible deniability. Whether through Iran's arming of the Houthis or China's passive allowance of precursor chemical flows to cartels, these partnerships allow CRINK nations to pursue objectives below the threshold of open conflict. This state use of nonstate instruments confirms that boundaries between state-sponsored coercion and terrorism are porous and that instruments of power and influence now traverse both realms.

Alignment and Divergence with U.S. 2025 Threat Priorities

The report's findings both align with and diverge from the U.S. Government's formal articulation of threats in 2025. Official strategy and assessment documents, including the Secretary of Defense Memorandum Directing the Development of the 2025 National Defense Strategy and the FY2026 Department of War Budget Overview, emphasize great power competition with China and Russia as the principal long-term challenge while maintaining focus on transnational threats such as terrorism, organized crime, and cyber aggression.^{205, 206, 207} This

²⁰⁵U.S. Department of Defense. Memorandum Directing the Development of the 2025 National Defense Strategy. Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, May 1, 2025. <https://media.defense.gov/2025/May/02/2003703230/-1/-1/1/MEMORANDUM-DIRECTING-THE-DEVELOPMENT-OF-THE-2025-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>

²⁰⁶U.S. Department of Defense. FY2026 Defense Budget Overview. Washington, D.C.: Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), March 2025. https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2026/FY2026_Budget_Request.pdf

²⁰⁷ODNI, Annual Threat Assessment 2025.

emphasis aligns with our assessment that state actors remain the outer boundary of risk and that hybridization between state and nonstate threats defines the contemporary environment. However, the U.S. stance also diverges from our findings. The 2025 SOUTHCOM and NORTHCOM posture statements highlight transnational criminal organizations as the dominant near-term VNSA challenge to the homeland, yet our analysis indicates that these actors represent only one facet of a globally interconnected hybrid threat system.^{208, 209}

Future Phenomena to Watch

Several emerging trends warrant close monitoring and integration into planning and analysis. First, commercial drones are increasingly accessible and affordable, allowing even low-resourced actors to conduct aerial reconnaissance, smuggle contraband across borders, and carry out stand-off attacks, meaning they can strike targets from a distance without exposing themselves to direct engagement. Second, encrypted communications, dark web marketplaces, and cryptocurrencies facilitate anonymous coordination, financing, and supply chains for illicit activity, reducing the risk of detection. Third, severe climate events and the population displacement they trigger can overwhelm local governance and security forces, creating ungoverned or weakly governed areas where extremist groups and criminal networks can recruit, operate, or establish safe havens. Fourth, the growth of private cyber-mercenary firms offers states and nonstate actors an expanded menu of deniable digital operations, from espionage to infrastructure disruption. Finally, advances in artificial intelligence are accelerating the speed and scale of disinformation campaigns, operational deception, and even autonomous targeting, introducing new doctrinal and ethical challenges across all domains of conflict.

Methodological Reflections and Limitations

Our framework provides a transparent, comparable snapshot, but it is not exhaustive. Key limitations include:

- **Scope of “Harm to The Homeland”:** Our Overall Threat Score emphasizes intent and demonstrated capacity for violent harm. It does not fully capture chronic, diffuse harms such as overdose deaths, economic coercion, or infrastructure attrition. This can make TCO threats appear lower relative to a nuclear-armed state, even when TCOs impose higher day-to-day domestic costs.
- **State Versus Nonstate Comparability:** Multiplying Will and Capability across fundamentally different actor types creates an index that is easy to interpret, but it combines two very different kinds of danger: short-term, immediate threats and long-term, systemic threats. For example, a state that is unlikely to launch a direct military

²⁰⁸U.S. Southern Command. Posture Statement of Admiral Alvin Holsey before the Senate Armed Services Committee. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Senate, March 2025.
https://www.southcom.mil/Portals/7/Documents/Posture%20Statements/2025_SOUTHCOM_Posture_Statement_FI_NAL.pdf

²⁰⁹U.S. Northern Command. Posture Statement of General Gregory Guillot before the Senate Armed Services Committee. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Senate, March 2025.
https://armedservices.house.gov/uploadedfiles/gen_guillot_n-nc_2025_posture_statement.pdf

strike on the U.S. homeland could still create severe strategic risk by using nuclear coercion, engaging in gray zone operations, or escalating conflicts through proxy forces.

- **Data and Time Sensitivity:** Open-source inputs vary in quality and timeliness. Actor scores are sensitive to recent events, attribution uncertainty, and reporting gaps, especially for clandestine networks and covert state support.
- **Model Structure:** The equal weighting of Will and Capability and the linear combination into a single score may mask important thresholds and nonlinear effects, including factors like network centrality, alliance structure, or sudden changes in access to critical resources such as an abrupt influx of funding, weapons, technology, or personnel that can rapidly alter an actor's threat trajectory.
- **Regional Aggregation:** In this assessment, threat scores for individual actors are averaged together within each COCOM region to create an overall regional picture. While this helps compare regions at a high level, it can blur important differences between subregions. For example, a single COCOM might contain both relatively stable areas and specific border zones where state-backed militias, cross-border smuggling, and extremist recruitment all reinforce each other. When scores from the entire COCOM are combined, these high-risk pockets can be hidden by lower-risk areas in the same region, making it harder to identify and prioritize them.

These limitations do not undermine the validity of the findings, but they do call for caution when comparing rank order results, such as North Korea's score relative to transnational criminal organizations, or CENTCOM's ranking relative to NORTHCOM/SOUTHCOM.

Priorities for Future Research

To build on this inaugural assessment, future work should prioritize:

- **Multi-Criteria Threat Indices:** In addition to the current Will and Capability score, develop separate indices to measure specific factors such as demonstrated harm inside the U.S., risk of strategic escalation, capacity for cyber and information operations, and ability to leverage proxies.
- **Network Analysis:** Use open-source and partner data to map relationships between states and VNSAs, as well as among VNSAs themselves, in order to identify enablers, logistics hubs, and key intermediaries whose disruption would have the greatest impact.
- **Dynamic Scoring and Sensitivity Testing:** Update scores over time and test them under different scenarios using stress tests and expert panels, allowing analysts to see how sudden changes might push actors above or below key threat thresholds.
- **Finance and Supply Chain Tracing:** Incorporate analysis of illicit financial flows, precursor chemical supply chains, and dual-use component sourcing to more precisely determine how both VNSAs and state proxies build and sustain their capabilities.

- **Regional Micro Studies:** Conduct focused studies on high-risk subregions such as the U.S. southern border, the Levant, and the Sahel to identify unique threat dynamics that may not appear in broader regional averages.
- **Adversary Learning and Technology Adoption:** Track how threat actors adopt and integrate new tools such as drones, AI-enabled systems, and cyber-for-hire services, and evaluate how these technologies change both their capabilities and the ways they can inflict harm.

Closing Assessment

The most significant threats to the United States no longer come from single actors—whether VNSAs or states—but the growing interdependence between them. Hybridization through cooperation, outsourcing, and shared enablers now defines how state and nonstate adversaries operate, adapt, and sustain themselves. Addressing these challenges requires more than tracking capabilities; it demands integrated, cross-domain understanding and coordination across agencies. By refining methods, improving data, and focusing research on networks and harm pathways, the Army and the broader U.S. Government can better anticipate, prioritize, and counter the threats that matter most.

Section 5

Appendix

Appendix A: VNSA Will and Capacity Ranking Metrics

Will for Anti-U.S. Action

10 – Maximum Hostility:

Sub-criteria: victimology framing, complete radicalization, ideological justification, global attention-seeking, full sympathizer support, imminent threat language.

- The group exhibits an extreme intent to attack the United States at every opportunity. Harming the U.S. (its people, homeland, or interests) is a core, stated goal of the group’s ideology or agenda.
- They openly declare war on America or call for violence against Americans, and they have demonstrated unwavering commitment to targeting the U.S. (e.g., issuing fatwas or manifestos against the U.S., regularly plotting attacks against U.S. targets).
- There are virtually no limits to what the group is willing to do to cause U.S. harm – even mass-casualty attacks are embraced (the 9/11 attacks showed that some terrorists are willing to inflict WMD-scale civilian casualties).

9 – Extreme Willingness:

Sub-criteria: strong grievance narrative, high radicalization, political or religious motivation, pursuit of publicity, near-unanimous sympathizer backing, and explicit large-scale threat language.

- The VNSA is highly motivated to hurt the United States, only slightly short of the absolute maximum.
- The group harbors intense anti-U.S. hatred and intent, consistently threatening U.S. interests. It may actively plan or attempt attacks on U.S. personnel, facilities, or the homeland, though perhaps with slightly more restraint or fewer declared “no limits” than a level-10 would have. (For instance, they might pursue large attacks but have not explicitly embraced use of indiscriminate mass-destruction if not necessary.)
- Still, a level-9 Will has clear, vehement anti-U.S. goals and likely a track record of violent acts or plots against U.S. targets to prove it.

8 – Very High Will:

Sub-criteria: frequent anti-U.S. rhetoric, partial radicalization, ideological framing, some media outreach, substantial sympathizer support, defined target timelines.

- The group has a very strong ideological or stated hostility toward the U.S., and a clear willingness to target U.S. assets, though possibly alongside other primary enemies.
- At this level, the VNSA frequently includes anti-American rhetoric in its propaganda and has possibly conducted attacks on U.S. interests (or attempted to) when able.
- However, their desire might be somewhat tempered by practical considerations or a focus on other “nearer” enemies (e.g., a local regime), making the U.S. perhaps a secondary (but still very important) target.
- They would readily attack U.S. persons or property given a viable chance, and may have already done so, but their hostility is not the single overriding obsession that defines a level-10 will.

7 – High Will:

Sub-criteria: clear adversarial grievance, moderate radicalization, ideological or political justification, occasional threats, solid sympathizer core, moderate threat immediacy.

- The organization is openly hostile to the U.S. and intends to cause harm if circumstances allow, though attacking the U.S. might not be its top priority at all times.
- It likely perceives the U.S. as an adversary (for example, due to U.S. support for an enemy government or due to ideological opposition) and will target Americans or U.S. sites deliberately if an opportunity arises.
- A level-7 group might not be constantly focused on U.S. targets (they could be primarily fighting a local insurgency or rival group), but they have demonstrated significant willingness – for instance, issuing occasional threats or attacking U.S. diplomatic missions or companies when provoked.
- In short, they hate the U.S. enough to attack when feasible, even if it’s not their sole mission.

6 – Moderate-High Will:

Sub-criteria: conditional grievance, partial ideological framing, some propaganda, mixed sympathizer support, limited threat immediacy.

- The group has a notable degree of anti-U.S. sentiment, but it may be conditional or contextual.
- At a 6, the VNSA definitely considers the U.S. an enemy actor or negative force, and might endorse harm against U.S. interests in rhetoric.
- However, direct attacks on the U.S. are not constant; the will is strong but somewhat restrained by other goals. For example, the group might primarily fight in its own country but occasionally threatens U.S. forces or interveners.

- If the U.S. directly opposes or intervenes against them, a level-6 group will actively retaliate against U.S. targets. Otherwise, they might focus on local foes most of the time. In essence, the group is willing to target the U.S., perhaps eagerly, but their animosity is a notch lower than the truly vehement levels above.

5 – Moderate/Neutral:

Sub-criteria: local grievances, occasional anti-U.S. rhetoric, low publicity drive, mixed sympathizer backing, minimal threat immediacy.

- The VNSA's willingness to attack the U.S. can be described as mixed or moderate.
- They do not specifically seek out U.S. targets as a primary goal, but they also are not friendly to the U.S. either – they could turn hostile under certain conditions.
- A level-5 will might characterize a group whose grievances are mostly local, but which harbors some anti-U.S. views (perhaps viewing the U.S. as an obstacle or an unwelcome influence).
- They might occasionally engage in anti-U.S. rhetoric or threaten U.S. interests, especially if the U.S. directly impedes their objectives.
- Overall, the intent to strike the U.S. is present but not particularly intense – it's on the table, not guaranteed. (For example, a regional insurgent group that mostly fights its government but might attack a U.S. base in-country if the U.S. takes action against it.)

4 – Some Low-Level Hostility:

Sub-criteria: minor anti-U.S. undertones, propaganda use, limited sympathizer fraction, negligible threat immediacy.

- The group shows limited will to target the United States.
- Any anti-U.S. sentiment is relatively minor or indirect.
- Perhaps the group's ideology has some anti-Western or anti-U.S. undertones, but the group rarely acts on them.
- A level-4 will might be assigned if the group would only target U.S. assets in very specific situations (e.g., if the U.S. actively confronts them) or as a low priority.
- They might use anti-U.S. slogans to gain local support or as propaganda, but tangible intent to commit violence against Americans is sparse. In general, the group's focus is elsewhere, and it does not seek out U.S. targets unless pushed into a corner.

3 – Minimal Hostile Intent:

Sub-criteria: incidental rhetoric, no propaganda drive, negligible sympathizer support, no imminent threat language.

- The VNSA has very little desire to attack the United States.

- It does not view attacking the U.S. as necessary for its goals and may even avoid direct conflict with U.S. forces or citizens.
- Any violence toward U.S. entities would likely be incidental or in self-defense rather than premeditated.
- For example, a level-3 will group might be an insurgent or criminal organization that primarily cares about local affairs and has no particular quarrel with the U.S. – they might only injure U.S. personnel if those happen to get in the way during other operations.
- Essentially, harming the U.S. is not on their agenda unless circumstances accidentally bring them into conflict.

2 – Negligible Will:

Sub-criteria: no grievance narrative, no ideological framing, no propaganda, no sympathizer support, zero threat immediacy.

- The group's intent to target the U.S. is almost nonexistent.
- They have no articulated anti-U.S. goals or ideological drive against America.
- Any violent acts impacting U.S. interests would be purely coincidental (for instance, a criminal gang kidnapping a U.S. tourist for ransom not because of nationality, but because they were a convenient target).
- A level-2 VNSA does not make threats against the U.S. and generally avoids entanglement with U.S. forces or citizens.
- The difference from level 3 is that here even opportunistic or defensive harm to Americans is extremely unlikely – they do not want a fight with the U.S. at all.

1 – Essentially No Will:

Sub-criteria: zero grievance, no ideology, no propaganda, no support, no threat language.

- The VNSA has virtually zero inclination to harm the United States.
- It shows no hostility in words or deeds toward the U.S. – indeed it might prefer to stay far away from any conflict involving the U.S.
- The group likely has a very localized or single-issue focus that has nothing to do with U.S. policies or people.
- It neither threatens nor would intentionally harm U.S. targets, even if given the chance. (For example, a separatist rebel group fighting for autonomy in its region with no foreign policy agenda would typically have no interest in targeting the U.S.)
- In short, a level-1 will means no demonstrated intent to target the U.S. whatsoever.

0 – No Hostility (Neutral or Friendly):

Sub-criteria: neutral or cooperative alignment, no grievance, no ideology, no support, no threats.

- A score of 0 indicates absolutely no will to attack the U.S. – in fact, the group may be neutral or even nominally aligned with U.S. interests in some way.
- This could describe a VNSA that is barely even an “actor” anymore (possibly dormant or purely focused on non-violent goals), or one whose goals are entirely unrelated to any conflict with the United States.
- The group has zero anti-U.S. sentiment: it neither threatens nor condones any violence against American targets. (In some cases, a “0” could even be a non-state group that cooperates with the U.S. against common enemies, though such a group might not be considered a violent threat actor at all.)
- Essentially, the group is no threat in terms of intent – it does not want to harm the United States under any foreseeable circumstances.

Capacity for Anti-U.S. Action

10 – Maximum Capability:

Sub-criteria: unlimited funding, stable diverse revenue, WMD/CBRNE access, world-class experts, safe havens, cyber offenses, network resilience.

- The group possesses an extraordinary ability to inflict harm on the U.S. – potentially on a catastrophic scale.
- A VNSA at capability 10 would be able to carry out attacks causing massive casualties or destruction in the U.S. homeland.
- This includes capabilities like weapons of mass destruction (nuclear, large-scale biological or chemical weapons) or other means to decimate a major city or a substantial portion of the population.
- For example, having the means to launch a nuclear or radiological attack on a U.S. city would qualify as level 10 capability. Such a group would have global reach, abundant resources, and state-like military assets.
- It can project force directly onto U.S. soil with devastating effect – whether by long-range weapons, large terror networks, or highly sophisticated cyber and sabotage skills. (Thankfully, few if any VNSAs truly reach this tier, but this defines the theoretical maximum.)
- In summary: a level 10 capability group could execute a 9/11-sized or worse attack at will, up to and including WMD-level destruction.

9 – Near-Catastrophic Capability:

Sub-criteria: nearly unlimited funding, advanced explosives, CBRNE ambition, expert cadre, multiple safe havens, strong cyber tools, resilient network.

- The VNSA has extremely high capability to harm the U.S., only slightly less than the apocalyptic level above.
- It likely commands hundreds or thousands of fighters or operatives and has access to advanced weaponry or technology (though perhaps not an actual nuke, or not as reliably deliverable).
- A level 9 group can conduct major attacks causing mass casualties or critical infrastructure damage. For instance, it might be able to coordinate multiple simultaneous attacks across continents, shoot down airliners, carry out high-casualty bombings in U.S. cities, or severely disrupt national networks (power grids, etc.) through cyber terror.
- The group's reach is global – they can strike U.S. interests anywhere in the world, and possibly within the U.S. homeland, with sophisticated methods.
- They have strong financial backing, military-grade arms, expertise, and likely safe havens.
- In short, a level 9 capability means the group can do everything short of true WMD devastation: they are capable of mass-scale terrorism (hundreds to thousands killed in an attack) and would severely challenge U.S. security forces in trying to stop them.

8 – Very High Capability:

Sub-criteria: significant funding, advanced conventional weapons, technical cadres, some safe havens, emerging cyber/CBRNE skills, transnational network.

- The group has a very significant ability to cause harm, on the order of a major international terrorist organization.
- At capability 8, the VNSA can conduct large-scale attacks (though not quite the largest possible) against U.S. targets, including possibly the homeland.
- They may not have weapons of mass destruction, but they could employ large vehicle bombs, hijack or destroy critical targets, or orchestrate prolonged multi-target assaults.
- The group likely has a transnational network of cells or affiliates, well-trained fighters, and substantial funding.
- They might be able to infiltrate the U.S. or coordinate attacks within U.S. borders through clandestine cells.
- Additionally, they may have state sponsors or sanctuaries that enhance their logistical reach.
- Essentially, a level 8 group's capacity includes causing hundreds of casualties in a single attack or conducting complex operations (e.g., simultaneous bombings or highly organized shootings) that challenge national emergency responses.
- Their operational tools – command-and-control systems, training programs, advanced weaponry – are highly developed, enabling successful attacks against hardened targets.

7 – High Capability:

Sub-criteria: robust funding, skilled bomb-makers, regional safe havens, solid logistics, basic cyber capability.

- The VNSA is highly capable of conducting significant attacks, though perhaps limited to certain regions or types of targets.
- A level 7 group can likely strike U.S. interests overseas with relative ease (for example, bombing an embassy, attacking U.S. military bases or diplomats abroad) and might attempt attacks on the U.S. homeland, albeit with a lower chance of pulling off a truly large attack.
- They have a strong cadre of personnel (maybe in the low hundreds) with military-grade small arms and explosives, possibly including skilled bomb-makers or hit squads.
- They enjoy solid funding and access to the black market or state-provided arms. However, their ability to project power might be somewhat regional – e.g., they can operate across a continent or neighboring regions, but their presence inside the U.S. is limited or under tight surveillance.
- In terms of scale, a level 7 capability group could kill dozens to scores of people in an attack and conduct operations that require coordination and planning (e.g., complex ambushes, mid-sized car bombs, downing a single airliner).
- They likely possess some technical expertise (communications, intelligence, cyber skills) but not the full suite a higher-tier group would.
- Overall: formidable capabilities that can seriously damage U.S. interests, though not yet at the “mass devastation” level.

6 – Moderate-High Capability:

Sub-criteria: steady funding, basic technical cadre, local safe haven, limited cyber/crime skills.

- The group possesses a moderate ability to inflict harm on U.S. targets, leaning toward the higher side of moderate.
- At level 6, a VNSA might be able to conduct well-executed attacks locally or regionally and has a limited reach into international targets.
- For example, they might infiltrate a neighboring country’s capital to attack a U.S. company’s office or ambush U.S. troops in their theater of operations. The group likely has hundreds of members or supporters, but with variable skill levels.
- Their armaments may include assault rifles, RPGs, IEDs, and possibly a few more advanced weapons (like anti-vehicle mines or MANPADS stolen or bought on the black market).
- They have some ability to coordinate multiple cells, though not on a truly global scale. A level 6 capability can result in multiple casualties (dozens) and significant damage in a single incident, but these would probably be localized (e.g., a bombing in their home region).

- They might also have some cyber or financial crime skills to raise funds or gather intelligence, but they are not masterful at these.
- If extremely motivated, such a group could pose a serious threat to U.S. citizens in certain environments (for instance, travelers or military personnel in the group's region of influence) and could possibly mount a smaller-scale attack on U.S. soil via a lone operative or small cell.
- However, their operations would likely be less sophisticated and easier to disrupt than those of higher-tier groups.

5 – Moderate Capability:

Sub-criteria: moderate funding, limited technical cadre, no safe haven, opportunistic tactics.

- The VNSA has a medium level of capability – enough to be dangerous on a small scale or within their locale, but limited in reach and scale of damage.
- A level 5 group might be able to kill several people or perhaps a dozen in an attack and can target U.S. interests opportunistically, especially in their home country or region.
- For instance, they could carry out a shooting or grenade attack on a U.S. consulate in their city, or set off a roadside bomb against a U.S. military convoy in their area.
- Their resources are moderate: they have some trained fighters (maybe in the tens), access to light weapons and improvised explosives, and enough funding or criminal income to sustain periodic operations.
- However, they likely lack advanced weaponry and have no meaningful presence inside the U.S. homeland.
- Any attack on U.S. soil would be difficult for them and probably limited to inspiring a lone actor rather than directly organizing it.
- At this level, the group's operational capability might rely on exploiting soft targets (places with limited security) and one-off attacks.
- They can coordinate among themselves to a degree, but large, complex plots are usually beyond their capacity. (In real terms, a group that wants to harm the U.S. but is at this level might manage a small bombing or attack on Americans abroad, but not a large-scale or multi-city operation.)

4 – Low-Moderate Capability:

Sub-criteria: low funding, basic weapons, no safe haven, no cyber/CBRNE.

- The group's ability to conduct anti-U.S. violence is fairly limited.
- At level 4, a VNSA may be active and violent in its local environment, but it can only pose a minor threat to the United States.
- They might engage in street-level attacks or guerrilla tactics in their home territory, but projecting violence beyond that is difficult. The group probably consists of a few dozen

members at most, with mostly small arms (rifles, pistols) and rudimentary bomb-making ability.

- They have little funding and only basic training.
- To harm U.S. interests, they would likely need a very favorable opportunity – for example, catching an unprotected lone American in their area or being indirectly involved in an attack on a lightly guarded U.S. facility.
- Their operations are simple (e.g., lone gunman attacks, crude IEDs) and often prone to failure.
- They have no significant international network. In essence, a level 4 capability means the group can pull off only minor attacks and usually only close to home.
- Against a well-secured U.S. target or outside their turf, their chances of success are very low.

3 – Low Capability:

Sub-criteria: minimal funding, few members, no secure base, no advanced skills.

- The VNSA has minimal capacity to inflict harm on the U.S. This group might exist and espouse violence, but its operational effectiveness is very poor.
- Perhaps they have a handful of members or recruits, few or no heavy weapons, and very limited skills/training.
- They likely operate at the level of occasional criminal acts or low-level insurgency in a small locale.
- A level 3 capability group probably cannot effectively strike any U.S. target except in the most happenstance scenario (e.g., an American happens to be in the wrong place where the group is conducting an attack).
- They lack coordination and resources – no substantial funding, no safe havens beyond maybe a village or neighborhood, and possibly internal disorganization.
- Any attempted attack on a U.S. installation or well-guarded person would almost certainly fail.
- Essentially, the group's reach is hyper-local: it might threaten local civilians or officials, but not a professional military force or a distant target.
- The group may even be on the verge of collapse or inactive. Overall, their capability to harm the U.S. is only marginal, reflecting severe constraints in manpower, equipment, and organization.

2 – Very Low Capability:

Sub-criteria: negligible funding, scant weapons, no logistics, no expertise.

- The group is barely capable of any concerted violent action, let alone against the United States. This might describe a fragmented or fledgling VNSA that exists in name but has almost no operational capacity.

- It could be a very small gang or militant cell (maybe a dozen or fewer individuals) with scant weaponry (perhaps a few rifles or handguns) and almost no funds.
- They have no logistics to speak of and cannot project power beyond their immediate vicinity.
- A level 2 capability group might manage a single small attack locally (for example, a drive-by shooting or a crude firebomb), but even that would strain their meager abilities. They certainly cannot reach any U.S. target unless one literally wanders into their village unprotected.
- They likely have no training in advanced tactics. In short, the group's capacity for violence is so low that it poses essentially no direct threat to U.S. assets except by sheer luck or accident.
- It is only slightly above nonexistent.

1 – Practically No Capability:

Sub-criteria: virtually no funding, no weapons beyond knives or pistols, no coordination.

- The VNSA is virtually incapable of conducting attacks. It may be an extremely small or inactive group – perhaps just a few scattered individuals with no heavy arms and no coordination.
- A level 1 group doesn't have the means to seriously harm anyone but perhaps a lone victim under rare circumstances.
- They lack money, weapons beyond maybe knives or a pistol, and have no infrastructure. They could not organize a real attack on a defended target at all.
- For U.S. interests, this group poses no meaningful danger: they cannot plan or execute any operation against American targets.
- If they attempted violence, it would likely fizzle or be easily thwarted. This level might also include groups that have been broken up or decimated to the point of impotence (e.g., leadership killed, members jailed, resources seized).
- Bottom line: at capability 1, the group is operationally on life support – effectively no capacity to threaten the U.S.

0 – No Capability (Defunct or Non-violent):

Sub-criteria: no funding, no weapons, no members, no support.

- A score of 0 means the entity has no operational capability to carry out attacks.
- Either the group is completely defunct (no active members or functional assets), or it exists but in a purely non-violent or political form with zero means to conduct any hostile action.
- They have no fighters, no weapons, no money, and cannot even project force in their local area, let alone against the U.S.

- This could describe a group that has disbanded, or perhaps a cell under such tight control that it's as good as neutralized.
- In any case, the group is incapable of violence against the United States (or anyone). Even if they hypothetically wanted to attack (will = 0 or not), at capability 0, they absolutely lack the capacity – they couldn't harm the U.S. any more than a random individual with no resources could. (As an analytic note, many VNSAs at this level would simply not be on the radar except to note they are inert.)