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National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC)

The National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) is one of several mission centers operating within the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. NCTC was established in August 2004 as the primary U.S. government organization responsible for analyzing and integrating all intelligence – except intelligence solely related to domestic terrorism – pertaining to terrorism and counterterrorism (CT).

Establishment

As part of its responses to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Congress established the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, colloquially known as the 9/11 Commission. The Commission was tasked with preparing an account of the circumstances surrounding the attacks and with making recommendations for corrective measures that might prevent future attacks.

In July 2004, the Commission released its final report, which asserted in part that government-wide information sharing at the time of the attacks was both inefficient and insufficient. To address this and other related findings, the commission recommended a number of organizational changes to the U.S. government, including the establishment of a “civilian-led unified joint command for counterterrorism.” This center was to be patterned after the CIA’s Terrorist Threat Integration Center (TTIC).

Following the release of the commission’s final report, President George W. Bush took a number of related executive actions, including the formal establishment of NCTC by Executive Order 13354 in August 2004. NCTC assumed the functions and responsibilities of TTIC and gained additional functions and responsibilities such as planning CT activities. NCTC’s establishment was later codified under Title 50 of the U.S. Code by P.L. 108-458.

Primary Missions

Threat Analysis

NCTC is directed by statute to function as the primary USG organization for “analyzing and integrating all intelligence possessed or acquired by the [USG] pertaining to terrorism and counterterrorism, excepting intelligence pertaining exclusively to domestic terrorists and domestic CT.”

Planning

NCTC is required by statute to conduct strategic operational planning for CT activities, integrating all related diplomatic, financial, military, intelligence, homeland security, and law enforcement activities. NCTC views planning as “ensuring unity of effort” across the whole of federal government. It further supports this mission by directing operational planning, assigning roles and responsibilities, and leading interagency terrorism task forces. Note that while NCTC may assign related roles and responsibilities to other federal agencies, NCTC is not

statutorily authorized to direct the execution of any resulting operations.

Information Sharing

NCTC is directed by statute to “ensure that agencies...have access to and receive all-source intelligence support needed to execute their [CT] plans or perform independent, alternative analysis” and to ensure that such agencies “have access to and receive intelligence needed to accomplish their assigned activities.”

In support of this mission, NCTC shares CT-related intelligence with Intelligence Community (IC) agencies and responds to requests for information and assistance. NCTC liaises with regional IC agencies and CT officials at the federal, state, and local levels through its Domestic Representative Program. It hosts the Joint Counterterrorism Assessment Team, an interagency partnership that produces CT intelligence products for federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial government agencies and the private sector.

NCTC also contributes to the *President’s Daily Brief* and the Department of Homeland Security’s *National Terrorism Advisory System Bulletin*, which communicates terrorist threat information to the public.

Identity Management

Title 50 U.S.C §3056(d)(6) establishes that NCTC must “serve as the central and shared knowledge bank” for the U.S. government (USG) on “known and suspected terrorists and international terror groups, as well as their goals, strategies, capabilities, and networks of contacts and support.” In support of this mission, NCTC maintains the *Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment* (TIDE), which is the USG’s central repository of information on international persons and groups with known or suspected links to terrorist activities. TIDE incorporates information derived from credible intelligence developed by USG agencies to support terrorist screening systems across the USG, such as the FBI’s Terrorist Screening Database. TIDE is used, for example, to construct TSA’s “no-fly list,” and to vet visa applicants and recipients of U.S. training and assistance.

NCTC Organization

NCTC’s staff of approximately 1,000 personnel includes permanent staff, personnel on rotational assignment from other federal government agencies, and contractors. NCTC is currently organized into four primary directorates: Intelligence, Terrorist Identities, Operations Support, and Strategic Operational Planning. The Directorate of Intelligence has primary responsibility within the USG for analysis of terrorism and terrorist organizations (barring exclusively domestic terrorism and terrorist organizations). The Directorate of Strategic Operational Planning is responsible for providing strategic operational plans for USG CT operations. See **Figure 1**.

NCTC Director

The Director of NCTC (D/NCTC) is appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate. The D/NCTC reports to both the President and the Director of National Intelligence (DNI). The D/NCTC reports directly to the President for the planning and progress of interagency joint CT operations. The D/NCTC reports directly to the DNI in matters relating to the day-to-day operations of NCTC and serves as the principal adviser to the DNI on CT intelligence operations. The D/NCTC also serves as the National Intelligence Manager (NIM) for CT.

National Intelligence Manager for CT

In 2005, the final report of the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission called for the IC to develop “Mission Managers” focusing on coordinating IC-wide intelligence missions. Accordingly, the DNI designated the D/NCTC as the NIM-CT, and directed the NCTC to support the NIM-CT in coordinating IC-wide CT activities.

NCTC’s Effectiveness

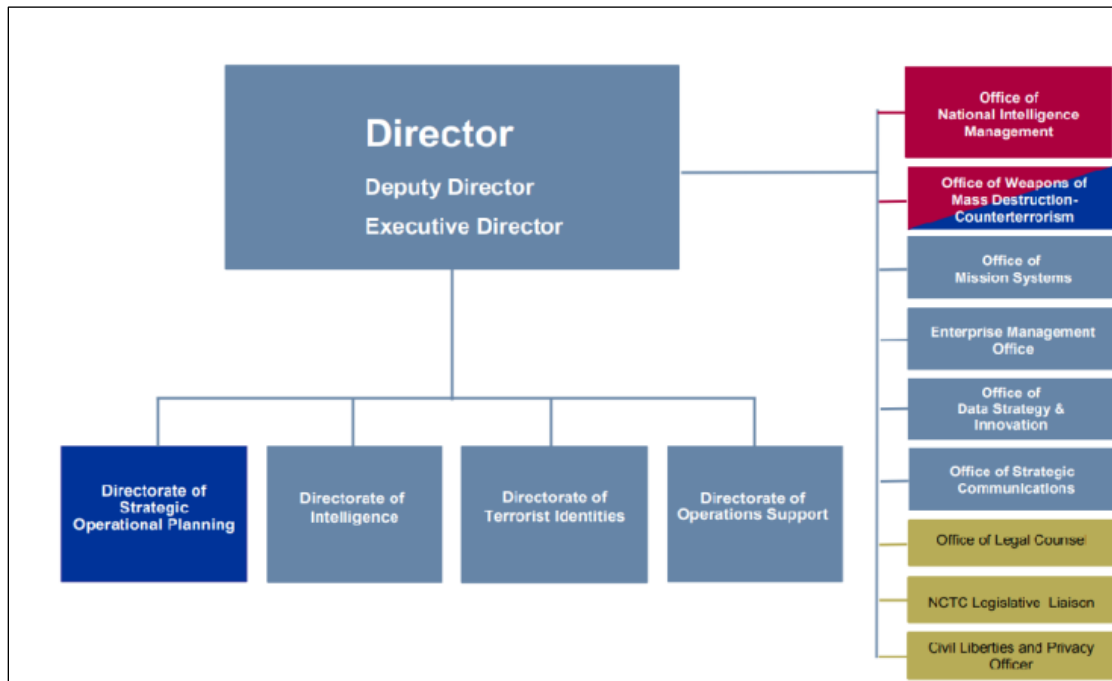
NCTC’s effectiveness in performing its missions is an oversight matter for Congress. Some observers have suggested that NCTC’s joint operational planning responsibilities are unclear. Others have questioned the effectiveness of threat analysis and information sharing within the IC, to include NCTC.

In an unclassified May 2010 report on the December 25, 2009 attempted terrorist bombing on Northwest Airlines Flight 253, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence

(SSCI) asserted that the IC’s failure to identify the threat posed by the thwarted attack’s perpetrator was the result of “systemic failures” across the IC, including NCTC’s “inadequate organization” to carry out its mission of analyzing and integrating all intelligence pertaining to terrorism and CT. Among other recommendations, the SSCI called upon the D/NCTC to ensure that “NCTC is organized and resourced to fulfill its responsibility to track, analyze, and report on all terrorist threats to the United States emanating from terrorist groups overseas.” In response, the DNI stated that the IC had “clarified roles and responsibilities among the IC’s [CT] functions,” and announced the “establishment of a dedicated analytic element at NCTC to thoroughly...pursue terrorist threat threads, including identifying appropriate follow-up actions by other intelligence and law enforcement organizations.”

Information sharing remains an area of interest in assessing NCTC’s effectiveness. In a review published after the April 15, 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, the Inspectors General (IGs) of the IC, CIA, Department of Justice (DOJ) and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) wrote that the agencies involved (including NCTC) had “generally shared information and followed procedures appropriately.” Nevertheless, the IGs also noted a need for broader sharing of threat information, especially with state and local partners. Similarly, in a March 2017 review, the IGs of the IC, DHS, and DOJ wrote that NCTC, along with other members of the IC, should develop “guidance” for information sharing “that accounts for the roles and responsibilities the agencies have according to statute.”

Figure 1. NCTC Organizational Chart



Source: NCTC, as of April 10, 2017.

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