Surveying the U.S. Counterterrorism Landscape with Dr. Sebastian Gorka

July 23, 2025
Featuring Dr. Sebastian Gorka
Moderated by Jonathan Schanzer

SCHANZER: OK, welcome, everyone. Thank you for joining us today for this event at Foundation for Defense of Democracies. I'm Jonathan Schanzer, FDD's executive director. It is Wednesday, July 23rd, and we're pleased to have you here for this conversation, some in person, some live, some listening to our podcast. Wherever you are, thank you for joining us.

The terrorism challenges facing the United States are significant, and they are widening. A dangerous network of independent and state-backed groups pose a grave danger to the United States, with America's critical infrastructure, global supply chains, economic assets, and citizens vulnerable to attack.

More than 20 years ago, after the War on Terror began, Sunni extremists also persist, joined by radical Islamists that are aligned and cultivated by the regime in Iran. With terrorism still proliferating across Central and South America, the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, Southeast Asia, and beyond, a strong and integrated U.S. counterterrorism strategy is needed today, just as it was after the attacks of 9/11.

Joining us today to discuss these complex issues is our friend, Dr. Sebastian Gorka. Dr. Gorka is deputy assistant to the president and national director for counterterrorism in the National Security Council at the NSC. A naturalized American citizen, Dr. Gorka was born in the United Kingdo – United Kingdom to Hungarian parents. He served in the first Trump administration as strategist to the president and held numerous academic positions, including Major General Horner Chair of Military Theory at Marine Corps University and associate dean of congressional affairs and relations at NDU, National Defense University.

For his work in counterterrorism, Dr. Gorka was awarded the Joint Civilian Service Commendation Award by U.S. Special Operations Command. He is a prolific author of monographs, book chapters, and articles, and he's written four books, the most recent of which is "The War for America's Soul." Perhaps most famously, Dr. Gorka helped found our National Security Network here at FDD, which now has more than 600 different participants that have cycled through and gone on to do great things. This was all the brainchild of Sebastian Gorka.

So, Sebastian, welcome back to FDD.

GORKA: It's great to be here. Thank you, Jonathan.

Yes, 15 years ago, I came to some guy called Cliff May...

(LAUGHTER)

...with an idea that young professionals who like national security should come together on a regular basis to listen to real professionals tell it how it is. And what's the number now? Crazy. How many people have you had through the National Fellows program?

SCHANZER: It's, I think, more than 650. I don't know if I can be corrected here...

GORKA: Right.

SCHANZER: ... by someone here, but I think it's about that number.

GORKA: Good.

SCHANZER: So truly, a remarkable testament to your vision, and I thank you.

GORKA: Good to be back. Good to be back. Thank you.

SCHANZER: Excellent to have you.

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OK, before we dive in and I start asking questions, a few words about FDD. For more than 20 years, FDD has been operating as a fiercely independent, nonpartisan research institution exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. As a point of pride in principle, we accept no foreign government funding, and I hope we never will.

OK, for more on our work, you can visit our website, FDD.org, follow us on X and Instagram, and subscribe to our YouTube channel. And that is the end of my commercial announcement.

So, I've got questions here for Sebastian. I hope you also have questions for Sebastian, so think about those. We'll be calling on you in about a half hour, so you can start to think about those. In the meantime, I have a few that I've teed up, and I'm going to get started, Seb, with your permission.

GORKA: Yeah.

SCHANZER: So, we're going to start with a basic question. We all know that the global War on Terror was the signature of the George W. Bush administration. The Obama administration, in its second term, tried to end the effort entirely. But then Donald Trump entered office with unfinished business, namely the Islamic State. We know what happened to the Islamic State at the end of the day. But we haven't heard much about American counterterrorism since, certainly not over the last four years. Is there still a War on Terror? And maybe just broadly speaking, what is the state of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State right now?

GORKA: Right, so let me be very blunt: America is back in the business of counterterrorism. Let me start with a little story from the second week of the new administration.

I'd been told by – I've traveled the IC, the intelligence community, DOD [Department of Defense], for the first couple of weeks getting the lay of the land after the last four years, and basically I was told, "We're not allowed to kill bad guys." They're out there, but the Biden administration had this insane system whereby any HVT [high value target] strike, any strike against a high-value target, had to be sent up to the White House through Jake Sullivan to the president for a green light. Insane.

So, what did we do? Day eight of the administration, I walked into the Oval Office with the then-national security advisor and a member of my team and I put a map on the Resolute Desk, and we said to the president, "Sir, this is a leading ISIS jihadi running freely around a terror compound, a cave system in Northern Samara – Somalia, and we've been watching him for about a year and a half." The president looked at – this is all declassified now, so it's – it's in *The Daily Mail*. You can read the whole story.

The president looked up from the Resolute Desk. He said, "What do you mean, 'we've been watching him?' Kill him." He got out the iconic Sharpie pen, ticked the "go" order on the operational documents we had in front of him. Less than 30 hours later, I was back in the Sit. Room under the West Wing with the national security advisor, with members of my team watching on the di – giant screens, this leading ISIS jihadi walk around this compound – (snap) – and then got turned into a red mist.

Since that time – and I checked this morning with my colleagues at my directorate, so I'll give you the fresh breaking news – the United States, excluding the Houthis and that campaign, we have neutralized more than 250 jihadis, and over 100 of those are leading jihadis. So, you may not be aware of it in the broader universe, but we are stacking them like cord wood.

SCHANZER: Wow. OK, some poetic words in there, "red mist" and "cord wood."

(LAUGHTER)

OK.

GORKA: I'm not a diplomat.

SCHANZER: No, no, you're not...

GORKA: I'm just in counterterrorism.

SCHANZER: No, but it makes for good programming.

OK, it – if the War on Terror continues – and – and I think you've just made the compelling case that it is continuing, that you have these things, and – but it's no longer a signature policy of the White House, right? I mean, we have so many other things that I think are taking center stage, whether it's China, Russia, Iran. I mean, you know, terrorists. I mean, right? It – there's a lot going on here.

So, what is the policy? Are – what are we doing to roll back the forces that engage in terrorism or that fund it? I mean, you know, taking out high-value targets is one thing, but there's got to be a bigger edifice, there's more architecture here, is there not?

GORKA: So – so, look, in the last 24 years, we have created the most exquisite counterterrorism platform globally the world has ever seen. If we have your select – if we have your cellphone details, we can basically kill you anywhere in the world within 72 hours, right? But at the end of the day, if we don't – if we just think of it as a kinetic function, we can do this forever.

And 77 million Americans voted for a commander-in-chief to return who was going to end the forever wars; end what the president called the "stupid wars." So, we're not about doing this forever. I'll be on the record right now. I want to put myself out of business in the next four years. I don't want counterterrorism to be a strategic function of America. Why? Because, as you said quite rightly, if you have the TS/SCI clearances, if you read the president's daily briefing like I do, you know that they are real strategic threats out there, the number one being China.

We can deal with terrorism, and we will. I am on the cusp of releasing the unclassified new presidential U.S. counterterrorism policy, and what I'll say right now is we are going to have a series of short efforts, high-intensity efforts, to make the leading terror threats to America combat-ineffective, at which point our friends, our allies, our partners in the Middle East and elsewhere pick up the terrorist suppression operations.

We don't want to be around every part of the world whacking terrorists forever. If we need to have a small footprint somewhere because of AQ [al-Qaeda] or ISIS, so be it, but at the end of the day, we want to make one thing impossible. And this is my metric. I look at the world for the president through one metric: XOps [external operations]. Is that threat group capable of doing external operations here on U.S. soil?

And can I just stop for a second and allow us all as a nation, as a Western alliance, to just take credit for the last 24 years? Because we think of recent attacks, whether it's New Orleans, whether it's October the 7th, but we have to think about one thing. For a very long time now, from the American perspective, the 9/11 threat has been nonexistent, meaning AQ does not have the capacity to kill 3,000 Americans in 102 minutes, which was their dream, these exquisite, high-level, mass casualty events.

Look at what ISIS, which is now, you know, the sexy new jihadi group for the last few years – what are they putting out in their publications? It's not incredibly complex operations that take two years to plan and sending guys to flight school.

Literally, they have what? Buy an F-150 and run some people down at a public event. That is a mark of what? Our success. That they have to use a car? I mean, jihadi propaganda is talking about what – and we see it in Europe – grab a knife and stab someone? That's not exactly a strategic threat. Yes, it's a tragedy every time it happens and every time somebody dies, but in terms of what AQ was 20 years ago, we have been very successful.

But eventually, we want to hand this over to a local CT [counterterrorism] suppression operation by our friends and allies.

SCHANZER: OK. I think we've got a good sense of the landscape here – weakened al-Qaeda, weakened ISIS, an aggressive American CT strategy. A surge, if you will. I think you've made that all very clear.

GORKA: But a – but for a short duration.

SCHANZER: Yeah. A surge. That's what a surge should be, right?

GORKA: I don't want people to associate it with Iraq and Afghanistan and 20 years later, right? Because that's the last time we used the phrase "surge."

SCHANZER: OK. Understood.

GORKA: Right?

SCHANZER: Fair enough, fair enough. OK, so I'm going to just broaden this out just a little bit further and just try to get a sense – and I want – I – if I can, I'd like to push you on this.

GORKA: Yeah.

SCHANZER: Is there a Trump doctrine at the end of the day? I mean, there are a lot of people that say Donald Trump just sort of does whatever he does, and it changes day to day, right? What you have right now is a very clear vision for counterterrorism and it fits into this broader matrix of global threats.

GORKA: Yeah, yeah.

SCHANZER: So, can you lay out the big picture?

GORKA: Totally. So – so this drives me insane, when you have the experts in the mainstream media say, "Well, the thing about President Trump is he's so unpredictable and it's so chaotic." You have to be a clinical cretin to make that statement. I mean, seriously.

SCHANZER: More poetry.

GORKA: Unpredictable? He is utterly predictable because if it's in the national interest, he does it. If it is against the national interest, he stops it. There is nothing more predictable, from tariffs – OK – to dropping, what was it, 14 32,000-pound bunker busters on Iran's nuclear facilities?

There's nothing haphazard or – and can we just for a moment – and I – and I'd like to salute the U.S. Navy. Every – everybody talks about our – you know, our Spirit bombers in that amazing mission, and I had the honor at the White House to meet the lead pilot. You know who you are.

(LAUGHTER)

But in addition to the – to the stealth bombing, we had also the U.S. Navy launch, what was it, scores of cruise missiles at the same time, in perhaps the greatest kinetic operation since Gulf 1. I was in the Sit. Room as it was happening, and the fact that not one Iranian air defense shot was fired, not one Iranian interceptor got off the runway, and we were in, we were out. Why? Because the president told the Iranians, "You will not be permitted to acquire nuclear weapons." And we keep our promises.

So how does CT fit into the broader geopolitical foreign policy view of the president? And – and again, I have known this man for 10 years. I started briefing him when he was candidate Trump in 2015. He is the most preternatural geopolitical thinker I have ever met. I mean, he just – he has it. It's that “spitzengefühl,” as the Germans say. He just gets strategy. And his policies – let's talk about America First, ‘cause America First is often misrepresented. It does not mean America alone. Look at what we just saw in – in, where was it, the Hague. I cut my teeth on NATO issues 32 years ago. And we

had a phrase in NATO, "free rider complex," that the majority of NATO nations didn't pay even two percent, and we had to pick up the tab at the end of the day. We picked up the tab for 50 years.

And the president said, "You are a low-down, deadbeat dad if you're not paying your membership dues, and we pick it up." And I'm in my SCIF, and I've got Newsmax on in the SCIF, and I see the coverage from the Hague. And I see the chyron, the bottom third, and it says, "President Trump gets five percent across the board from all NATO."

And I look at it, and I'm about to get out of my SCIF and call Chris Roddy, the CEO of Newsmax, a buddy of mine, and say, "Hey, Chris, you better fix that chyron. There's no way it's five percent. I was fighting for two percent when I was back in the DOD." And then I paused, and I went online.

We weren't getting two percent. He doubles it, more than, and gets to five percent. "America First" means America with those who share our Judeo-Christian values, but you've got to act like an ally and a partner. And beneath all of that is one very simple principle that everybody misses: America First and MAGA is founded on the concept of national sovereignty. It begins with national sovereignty.

President Trump was elected in 2016 because of one thing, pretty much – build the wall. The idiocy of what the opposition did in the last four years is basically get him reelected on the same issue. OK? On the same issue. And you cannot function as a Westphalian nation state without exercising sovereignty. And this goes for all our friends. OK? We want Mexico to be sovereign. We want every nation to have an exercise of sovereignty because otherwise you can't secure your people.

So, geopolitically, the CT policy I'm driving fits into a broader vision. America wants all our friends and partners to succeed together, but you have to act like an ally.

SCHANZER: OK? All right, I've got some rapid-fire ones for you.

GORKA: Yeah.

SCHANZER: Let's talk about the Islamic Republic of Iran for a minute.

GORKA: Yeah.

SCHANZER: Couldn't let you get out of conversation here at FDD without talking about Iran.

GORKA: Sure.

SCHANZER: Look, the Islamic Republic continues to arm and fund its proxies. It's a serious threat to America's allies and interests across the Middle East. What's the strategy here?

GORKA: The strategy is max pressure. Max pressure, max pressure, max pressure.

No regime change. We are not in the business of deploying the 82nd Airborne to do regime changes anywhere. We don't believe in that.

We would like the people of Persia, including all the minorities of Persia, to eventually liberate themselves, absolutely. But at the end of the day, Iran – and I tell my colleagues in the Interagency, you have to understand that we love to live in our government in these silos of excellence, right?

These silos. "I'm the Iraq desk officer. I'm the Syria desk officer." Wrong. President Trump looks at the world regionally. And for him, the whole of the Middle East is about one thing, one thing: Iran. Why? Because they wouldn't be shooting at our ships. They wouldn't be shooting down our predators. Like the Houthis? Are you kidding me? A bunch of, you know, charcoal smugglers shooting down our Preds? Why? Because of Iran.

So, making sure, the second demand – we've only made two demands to the leadership in Tehran. Number one, you will not acquire nuclear weapons. Number two, you will absolutely stop supporting proxies. So, that's what we're about in the Trump administration. No more support to any threat groups in the region.

SCHANZER: OK. I'd like to see if the Islamic Republic will accede to that, but that's another question.

GORKA: We fixed the first one already.

SCHANZER: OK. Briefly, because it's in the news,,,

GORKA: Yeah.

SCHANZER: …and you and I did speak about it: Syria.

GORKA: Yes.

SCHANZER: Complicated stuff.

GORKA: Yeah.

SCHANZER: The Israelis have intervened, tried to prevent massacres. The US, diplomatically, is engaging, not militarily the way the Israelis are.

GORKA: Yes.

SCHANZER: What's the answer here?

GORKA: From my perspective, and what I'm recommending to my boss, Acting National Security Advisor and Secretary of State Rubio, and what I had literally a call this morning with the State Department on, Syria has to function.

Again, it goes back to America First – sovereignty. This has to be a functioning state. We said to the acting prime minister – to the president, sorry – to Jolani, we've said, "OK, we want you to make Syria great again." That's only going to happen if every constituent element of that nation has a seat at the table. Whether it's the Kurds, the Christians, the Alawites, the Druze, they have to be part of the Syrian nation.

Now, I know that's not easy, and I know the Kurds, who we dearly love after their, you know, bleeding with us and fighting with us against jihadis for the longest time, want to have autonomy there and elsewhere. But no, come to the table because this is your shot.

When the most powerful president in the modern age says, "I want to make Syria great again," I would say to you, if you're Druze, if you're Christian, if you're Kurd, if you're Alawite, get in on that deal because this is the only time it's going to happen. So, all the confessional constituents come together as one is my recommendation.

SCHANZER: OK. Not sure that's happening immediately.

GORKA: No.

SCHANZER: But it's something to work on.

GORKA: No. The first thing, and I'll be – you know, the five-meter target is to make sure that these communities are capable of protecting themselves because we don't want to wake up every week and see another massacre. So, number one priority, make sure that state sees an end to the massacring of whichever confessional community is, and then build it together. Not America building Syria. The Syrian communities building Syria.

SCHANZER: OK. Another question, totally different topic: cartels.

GORKA: Yes.

SCHANZER: Fascinating to me, because I'm fascinated by the Trump administration's designation of drug cartels as terrorists.

GORKA: Yes.

SCHANZER: This is something really different for me as a former Treasury guy.

GORKA: Right.

SCHANZER: On the one hand, I see the logic. You know, they've engaged in terrorism. On the other hand, we have other authorities to target these people, right? Kingpin Act. So, what is the logic of terror designations versus Kingpin, or just plain old indictments handed down here by our Justice Department? Why go the route of terrorism?

GORKA: So, I'll tell you the why, and then I'll tell you the justification. The why is because – you know this from your past life as a Fed, but it does open up a panoply of tools that are otherwise not available to us, especially when it comes to individuals. When you start, you know, designating individuals, that's when an entity thinks twice about its behavior. So, designation as an effective tool, number one.

Number two, what's the justification? I did this on my Newsmax show about a year ago. I sat down and I did the numbers. So, how many KIA since the end of World War II wearing the uniform of the Republic? How many Americans killed in combat operations after World War II? So, that's Korea, Vietnam, Panama, Grenada, Gulf One, Gulf Two, and G1 [Gulf One]. The total since '45 is 103,000 Americans killed in combat.

How many Americans were killed because of Biden's open border policies? You can find the number. It's hidden deep in the CDC website. In the second year of the Biden open border regime, as a result of drug overdoses, mostly fentanyl smuggled across the southern border, 110,000 Americans were killed. That's the why.

More Americans were killed in one year under Biden by the cartels and the Chinese precursor substances that made the fentanyl than in 75 years of combat. That's why we did it, because they declared war on us, and we will not permit them to kill a 100,000+ Americans every year.

SCHANZER: OK. That's a remarkable number.

All right. I want to ask you about something that we've been hearing about. We continue to hear about efforts in Congress, and possibly with the executive branch, about a possible effort to designate the Muslim Brotherhood.

This was something that began during the last Trump administration. Actually, I'm old enough to remember when the Treasury department was grappling with this back in 2003-2004. That failed. It failed again during the Trump administration, Trump 1. It looks like it's back on the table now, right?

We've got Senator Ted Cruz introducing new legislation.

GORKA: Yes.

SCHANZER: Hearing possibilities of an executive order. Tell us a little bit about what's going on here. Is this – do you think this thing has legs?

GORKA: Look, I would like to see it happen. Why? Because, you know, I've been studying this for 25, 26 years now. I don't care whether it's Sunni or Shia. Every member of the modern global jihadi movement, whether it's al-Qaeda, al-Nusra, ISIS, Hamas, is what? Is a descendant of the Muslim Brotherhood ideologically.

If you read the writings of Hassan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Brigadier [S.K.] Malik, on down to [al-]Zawahiri, to bin Laden himself, it is the same ideology of Fard Ayn, of the compulsion to jihad. As a result, the Muslim Brotherhood is the granddaddy of them all.

As such, if we can designate, as we have Hamas, which in its founding charter from 1984 says, "We are a chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood," then why haven't we designated the Brotherhood itself? So, all I'll say right now is I like the idea.

SCHANZER: OK. He likes the idea. So, do I. OK.

GORKA: And thank you for everything FDD has done in the last 15 years to tell the truth about the Brotherhood.

SCHANZER: Yeah. Well, we are certainly trying to do that. And we certainly see that the Brotherhood lies at the – really, it's a basis...

GORKA: Yeah.

SCHANZER: ... for al-Qaeda, for ISIS, for Hamas, for basically every jihadi group. And, of course, you know that the Islamic Republic has a special relationship with the Brotherhood as well.

I remember after the Brotherhood took over in Egypt, the first visit of a foreign leader to Egypt was Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. You get a sense of this camaraderie that exists, and it's not a Sunni-Shia thing. It is an Islamist thing. And ultimately this is, well, one of our main missions here at FDD.

GORKA: Let me just add, that's why in the new counterterrorism strategy, which will be unclassified, there will be classified annexes. But one of the things that we're very clear of in the unclassified version, that to use a Clausewitzian term, the "center of gravity" of the global jihadi movement is the ideology.

We can whack terrorists for centuries. But if we delegitimize their ideology that, you know, you're only a good Muslim if you're a jihadi, then we actually win the final battle. So, with our Muslim allies – the Jordanians, with the Emiratis, with the Moroccans, we will be very aggressive in taking out the ideology of jihad instead of what the Obama and Biden administrations told us, ideology is irrelevant. Yeah, right.

SCHANZER: Ideology is very relevant. OK. A couple of questions that I've got for you before we turn it to the audience.

GORKA: Yeah.

SCHANZER: So, that's just your cue to start to think about questions, guys.

Tell me about some of these young kids in Europe that are getting turned on to terrorism. You told me recently the numbers of attacks by teenagers have more than doubled over the last couple of years. So, what is going on?

GORKA: So, one of the things I had to do when I came in is to take an estimate of the situation. What's changed since we were in the White House last time? And one of the most disturbing trends, it's not huge, but everyone is seeing it. You know, you talk to the Australians, you talk to the Brits, everyone is seeing this phenomena. The age of radicalization is dropping precipitously.

So, we are seeing 12-year-olds, 14-year-olds, radicalizing into terrorism, which we have not seen before. Part of that is the transmission belt. And we're seeing a lot of gaming platforms and encrypted messaging services on gaming platforms being used to recruit and radicalize teenagers. So, that's something we will be grappling with ourselves in the strategy and with our partners and allies, because this is a very disturbing phenomenon.

SCHANZER: Oh, absolutely. And I'm actually, I'm just thinking right now as you talk about this. I know that the Iranians have recruited youth in places like Sweden, as I understand it, to attack Israeli embassies. And we're talking about kids

that are 14, 15, 16-years-old. And it's just unbelievable that this is the trend and you're seeing it clearly now on the Sunni side of the street as well as –

GORKA: Absolutely, absolutely.

SCHANZER: OK. Disturbing, and I hope it's a trend that we begin to arrest.

I want to ask you about the 10/7 attack and the subsequent multi-front war. In your view, has this contributed to a more complicated landscape for counterterrorism? I mean, obviously we see the proliferation of Iranian proxies. We know they've been defeated in large part by the Israelis, not completely wiped out, but certainly weakened. I'm assuming that probably helps the CT environment. But then there is the radicalization that we see against Jews, against America, against Israel. So maybe tell us a little bit about this mixed bag.

GORKA: Well, firstly, if you haven't done so already, everyone who's watching and everyone in this room, if you have not seen the unedited 47-minute video from the Hamas body cameras and CCTV of what they actually did on October the 7th, you need to see it. I saw it on Capitol Hill. And after I saw it, I posted a video that went viral in which I told the people of Israel, the Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu – this is before I became back into government – and I told the IDF, kill every single person involved in that massacre and salt the earth over their ashes.

I've been doing this for decades. I used to watch the jihadi videos from ISIS and al-Qaeda. Not the edited ones, the full one. Daniel Pearl being beheaded live. Brave Jordanian pilots in a cage being burnt alive. So, I thought, I'll be good. I can watch this video. Nothing I'd watched in my two decades prepared me for what I saw that day. Six-year-old boys with their eyes hanging out of their head sockets, unarmed men being decapitated with blunt shovels. You need to see this.

This is a war between barbarity and the civilized world. So, that's the reality of October 7th. I praise the government of Israel, I praise the IDF, because what they have done in response is a redrawing of the map of the Middle East that will change geopolitics for at least a century. One of the greatest things they have done is to ensure that the strategic threat of Iran is now incapable of resupplying its proxies for the territory of Syria. God bless Israel for doing that.

Now, we have to finish the job. We have to make sure Iran stops supplying its proxies, and we have to stabilize Syria. But as far as I'm concerned, despite the ideological way it has been exploited by certain actors here and elsewhere, the response to October the 7th has actually benefited us because people have woken up to the horrors of modern – and it's not anti-Semitism. Our former coordinator of anti-Semitism, I bumped into him as I was going in to watch that video.

He said, “Don't use the phrase anti-Semitism. It's PC [politically correct]. It's Jew hatred.” That's what it is. And the face of modern Jew hatred, from the campuses of Harvard to the streets of New York, has been unveiled. And now we have to win the battle against those who wish to exterminate our civilization.

I'm sorry, I'm going to steal 90 more seconds. The most important speech the president has ever given – and has nothing to do with the fact that I was involved in framing it. I didn't write it, but I helped frame it. And this isn't about me. The most important speech the president has ever given, in my opinion, was 2017 in Warsaw. Polish government wanted him to give it downtown inside one of their government buildings. President said, “No. I want to stand next to the 20-foot bronze statue of the ghetto uprising of that Polish freedom fighter literally coming out of the sewers with a machine gun to kill Nazis. And I want to give my speech there.” We got it done. Shortest speech he's ever given. Thirty-nine minutes long.

If you haven't watched it or you forgot it, go and watch it today. The last three minutes, President Trump says the following: “The only question of the age is if we in the West have the will to fight and defeat those who wish to destroy our civilization.” That is President Trump and that is the question of the age. And you saw the evidence of that on October the 7th.

SCHANZER: Wow. OK, I had another question, but you kind of preempted it, and I think we're going to end it there, in terms of my part in this.

Want to open it up to all of you. We have someone who will be able to bring a microphone to you. So please do raise your hand and we'll call on you. And just when you do get the microphone, just state your name, try to keep your question in the form of a question, and we'll try to answer it in the form of an answer. Yes, sir? In the back.

SLOAME: Stuart Sloame. I have two questions, one relating to the first term and one the second term. With respect to the first term, you talk about the pressure camp – maximum pressure campaign against Iran. Could you explain why after an American drone was shot down, that the Air Force had planned and actually was in the process of retaliating, that the President aborted that mission with 10 minutes to go?

The second question has to do with – we read in the media that several counterterrorism units in various agencies, including those that protect the country against cyberattacks, have been eliminated or dissolved in this administration. Could you explain if that's true and why?

GORKA: First question is an operational question that I'm not going to discuss. Second, the report is utterly fallacious. No cyber units have been dissolved that are essential to the security of the nation. Not true.

SCHANZER: Brian Katulis.

KATULIS: Thanks, Jonathan. Thanks, Dr. Gorka. Brian Katulis, Middle East Institute. You answered the question on Syria. What about next door in Lebanon? Hezbollah has been an enemy, a terrorist group that has taken a hit in part because of Israel's bold actions. But where do you see the pathway forward there? And when you talk about partners, do you see the Lebanese armed forces as part of that partnership? Or, do you – how do you see a “Lebanon First” in the way that you've described the “Syria First” strategy?

GORKA: Well, firstly, you're absolutely right. Thanks in large part, or most part, to Israel. Whether it's the pager operation or other amazing operations with regards to Hamas and Hezbollah. They're at the weakest they've been for a long, long time. What we are doing through the great work of Scott Bessent at Treasury, also weakening the rat lines to that organization.

With regards to the administration in Lebanon, I'm very happy that a former student of mine at National Defense University is now the president. I have to go and visit Joseph [Aoun] sometime and talk to him. Let's just say the relationship is positive but could be improved in terms of matching verbiage to actual results. Can I be diplomatic for just one answer? Matching verbiage to results. I think you get my drift. Thank you.

SCHMITT: Eric Schmitt from *The New York Times*. Dr. Gorka, two-part question. The first is, you talked a little bit about Syria, but can you talk about Jolani himself? President al-Sharaa? Do you believe he's a true leader in the country who can rally those disparate elements together in Syria's best interest?

And the second question is, the Sahel is arguably the fastest growing place where both Islamic terrorism, in terms of al-Qaeda and ISIS affiliates, are amassing and expanding their presence. The US has pulled out its military presence from Niger. The French just recently pulled out their last permanent capabilities from Senegal. What is your take on the threat there? And how, with a lack of US, more or less, presence and French presence there, how do you anticipate addressing that growing threat? Thank you.

SCHANZER: Two excellent questions.

GORKA: Neither of which I will be addressing because, as Mr. Schmitt knows, even though he deigned to respond to the last email I sent him after he wanted to interview me, I do not answer the questions of those who endanger our armed

forces. You and your colleague wrote an article within 32 minutes of an active operation going green as our pilots were in the air. You are a disgrace, sir, and you endanger U.S. armed services, so go to hell.

SCHANZER: OK, I guess we're not going to get that question answered. Sorry about that. OK.

ALKHATIB: Hi. Ahmed Fouad Alkhatib from the Atlantic Council. I want to ask you, what role do you think the United States can play in helping Gaza, my native homeland, recover in a post-Hamas phase to train the next cadre of Palestinian security personnel beyond just the typical talk of bringing the Palestinian Authority in? There's a really serious push by Gazans themselves to take matters into their own hands and to create a new security apparatus. So, what can we, as America, do to support that new generation of security?

GORKA: Great question. So, I think we have to separate that. There's the operational part of that question and then there's a political part.

And I have to doff my cap. This morning, I received an update from my good friend, Lieutenant General Mike Fenzel, who is the U.S. coordinator for security in Jerusalem, working very closely with the people in Gaza. Right now, operationally, there's some good news, in terms of what's happening on the ground. Police units, security units that we are helping to train – are actually working quite closely with Israel. A lot of good things are happening at the tactical and operational level.

As far as I am concerned, none of that goes anywhere until the political leadership changes. What I would like to see is, maybe from the diaspora or the region, I'd like to see people who care about Gaza, who are from Gaza, to come in and say, "You know, the corrupt crony class has to go, and I am prepared to put my life on the line publicly and be part of some new polity that will lead this population to a brighter future."

The trouble is, when you have local polling demonstrating that more than 60 percent of Gazans agree with October the 7th, it's not a policing issue that's the problem. It's a cultural issue. If you think killing children is fine, shooting girls at pop concerts is fine because they're Jewish, it doesn't matter how good your local police forces are. You have a cultural issue.

So, I welcome brave people from the region who say "I am from there and I want to help Gaza." But we can't do it with the current corrupt – I mean, you're – you're seeing the photograph of that leader, right, the wife of the leader coming out of the tunnel with the $40,000 Louis Vuitton handbag. It's, like, come on, you – you're not going to fix Gaza while – whilst your politician's wife is running around with a $40,000 handbag.

So yeah, it's about political culture. Not impossible, but we need some brave men and women to say, "I am here to help fix Gaza."

SCHANZER: Let me just actually add to that. Foreign assistance to Gaza to help stand up new governing structures, this has been a big part of the discussion, right?

Have you been talking to folks, let's say in the UAE or Saudi Arabia, you know, the countries that have been generally talked about as we think about a new post-war reality in Gaza?

GORKA: Let me answer that question by again explaining who the president is and how he thinks. Did – do you remember when he went back to "We're going to fix Gaza, we're going to take over Gaza"? Do you remember that – that comment, right, that the world blew up at? “What – oh, my gosh, what are you – what's he doing? How dare he!”

SCHANZER: We call that the “Gaza-a-Lago.”

GORKA: Gaza-a-Lago. The Gaza-a-Lago comment. How stupid people are is really quite incredible; people who are in this city and call themselves “expert.” And I bet none of them have read "The Art of the Deal." If you haven't read "The Art

of the Deal," you have no idea how President Trump stopped the war between India and Pakistan, nuclear nations; how he has basically rewritten the global trade system in a matter of weeks with his tariffs. You just don't get it.

What was the Gaza-a-Lago comment about? It's not about gold towers being, you know, built, and golf courses on Gaza. What's it really about? Well, watch what happened. The President said, "We're going to take over Gaza, we'll fix it." What was the result? For 48 hours, the Gulf states go, "Oh, my gosh," right? The "experts," the talking heads say, "That's outrageous. Who does he think he is?" 72 hours later, what was the result? Very rich nations of the Middle East that haven't lifted a finger in relative terms for Gaza in decades said, "Hmm, maybe we should start investing. Maybe we should help rebuild that benighted part of the world."

That's the Trump effect.

SCHANZER: Let me ask, though – I don't think – to be fair, I don't think we saw them immediately rush in.

GORKA: No, no, no, no, no...

SCHANZER: But I would say...

GORKA: ... a catalytic issue.

SCHANZER: ... but I would say that the potential now for these nations...

GORKA: Yes.

SCHANZER: ... to rush in after Trump dropped MOPs [Massive Ordnance Penetrators], and other ordnance on Iran...

GORKA: Right.

SCHANZER: ... that, I think, probably was a bit more compelling of an argument.

GORKA: But it all – it all fits together. And the MOPs – the 34,000-pound bombs – again, you have to understand this isn't new, this isn't novel. This is part of a complete trend line for the last eight years.

Look at the first Trump administration. I've labeled this, and the president has allowed me to label it such. He agrees with it. This is called "surgical strength." Look at the multiple instances – this isn't just Fordow, this is multiple instances of surgical exercise of overwhelming force. When we told the president that Assad is about to launch chemical weapons for the second time – again, this is all declassified – he said, "Really? Where? Oh, that air base? Turn it into a sheet of glass." We launched 52 cruise missiles, evaporated all the chemical weapons.

And do you remember the photo opportunity? Xi Jinping was having a state dinner at Mar-a-Lago as we did this, and the president lent over Xi's shoulder and through the interpreter said, "Oh, Xi" – as he was eating the best chocolate cake in the world, he said, "Oh, Premier Xi, I just turned Assad's chemical weapon base into flaming rubble." That was a message for many people, including little Kim, including for the Kremlin.

Look at Soleimani. Look at the Wagner – everybody's such a big expert on the Wagner Group after the failed coup – the fake, failed coup. Well, we knew a little bit about the Wagner Group eight years ago – again, declassified. When we told the president 300 Russians are running around the Middle East, mercenaries, right, who are actually tier one guys working for the Kremlin, destabilizing the region, what did he say? "They're doing what?" He told Jim Mattis, "Kill them all now."

In the four-hour Battle of Khasham, 300 Russian military were vaporized. Now, in context, not one American president has done that since the October Revolution of 1917. Not the great, vaunted Gipper, not even Ronnie killed hundreds of SOBs [sons of bitches] in one day. My boss did, President Trump.

We don't invade other people countries and – countries, and say we're going to turn you into Switzerland, but if we see a threat, we will come down on you like the hammers of hell. So, whether it's tariffs or 14 34,000-pound bombs, it all fits together.

SCHANZER: Other questions?

ROD: Thank you very much – oh, is that on? Thank you very much. Marc Rod with *Jewish Insider*. Two questions, if you don't mind. Firstly, for the last two years, there's been a lot of discussion about Qatar and Turkey's sponsorship of Hamas, hosting a Hamas leadership. Is that something this administration is working to change, working to end?

And then on the homeland front, a number of your colleagues from the administration have warned about the threat of Iranian-inspired, Iranian-backed retaliatory attacks inside the United States. How do you assess that threat at this point? Is that coming more from sort of lone-wolf-type actors who are radicalized, or from embedded, quote/unquote "sleeper cells"? And what's being done to address that?

GORKA: First question, I'll answer thusly: I am imminently traveling to that part of the world, so that should tell you something.

Secondly, with regards to what we call “lethal plotting” in U.S. government, that falls under my directorate. I am heavily involved in dealing with it. I'll – the only thing I'm at liberty to talk – say right now is, because of how we've boxed in Iran, they are basically forced to use surrogates. If you look at the recent unclassified arrest in the UK – I was in the UK right after those Iranian plots against the embassy, the Israeli Embassy, were foiled. They do what – they're so desperate they hire local Mafia-types, biker gangs, you name it. In this case, it was members of the Iranian diaspora. They cannot do – we've made it so hard for them, they can't deploy their own assets, which is a good thing. Beyond that, we take it very seriously, and that's what I can say right now.

SCHANZER: And of course, we have seen evidence of this in the past, where the Iranians have sought out contractors...

GORKA: Yeah.

SCHANZER: ... to try to take out the Israeli ambassador or the Saudi ambassador...

GORKA: Right.

SCHANZER: ... here in Georgetown, for that matter.

GORKA: Right, right.

SCHANZER: So, we know that this is...

GORKA: It's real.

SCHANZER: ... a typology for them, and it's something that they do.

If I can, though, I want to just ask you. You said you're imminently traveling to that part of the world. Could you say just another word or two about how you view the Qatari and Turkish role in support of Hamas, and maybe in support of some other movements that maybe are in your portfolio?

GORKA: You're forcing to be me – be a diplomat again.

SCHANZER: Oh, gosh.

GORKA: Turkey – Turkey is an important nation. It's a geopolitical nation. It has a role to play with us as a NATO nation. But there are things I will be discussing with Ankara that I find leave me a sense of unease not just with the group you

mentioned, but also with recent plots you can read about in terms of transiting of ISIS terrorists across Turkey. That's something I want to work with our colleagues in Ankara to fix.

With regards to Qatar, Qatar has a choice it has to make – a very simple choice it has to make. Do you give any kind of succor to those who do not help in the stabilization of the region? That's all I'm going to say. In the open source, you can dig a little bit deeper. FDD's been, you know, forward-leaning on all of this.

We have an open invitation to every country of the world, not just the region. Conservatives do not believe in zero-sum games, OK? Sorry – conservat- yes, we do not believe in zero-sum game. That is the left. The left believes there is a pie, and the pie must be divided. We believe that the pie can always grow. Whether it's prosperity or whether it's security, we want everyone who wants to join us to grow the pie of prosperity and safety together.

Eight years ago, when the president went to the Middle East on that historic Hijra – in that Hijra speech – the Hijra speech, what did he say? He said, "It's about security, security, security. Rid your own nations of your jihadis." Now, when he went back, we evolve. We've gone from what? Security to prosperity. Why? Because we had the Abraham Accords. Come together, and let's go to the next stage of our friendship. And that's why. Funny. We were in the White House thinking, "Maybe he'll come back with a trillion. Maybe we'll get $1 trillion-worth of investment." He comes back with 4.7, and you go, "That's the Trump effect."

SCHANZER: By the way, just as you mentioned, the Turkish role in facilitating the transfer of ISIS fighters...

GORKA: Yeah.

SCHANZER: ... finance, this has been going on for almost 10 years now.

GORKA: Yeah.

SCHANZER: We've been watching that border, very porous border...

GORKA: We – there has to be a balance between their conceptualization of the PKK [Kurdish Workers' Party] threat and threats that we share such as ISIS. I think that's where the rebalance has to come. But yes, it's an old phenomenon.

SCHANZER: Yeah, I mean...

GORKA: Yeah.

SCHANZER: …from oil smuggling to antiquity smuggling...

GORKA: Yeah, yeah.

SCHANZER: ... to, you know, the transfer of people, it's been a huge problem, and I – I do hope that you'll convey that when you – when you see our friends in Ankara.

We've got one more here.

ABDELMALAK Thank you. Mina Abdelmalak from the Holocaust Memorial Museum. I want to ask you about the ideological question that you – you mentioned. The Egyptians tried in the past, the Emirates – I think the last attempt to kind of combat Islamism by, you know, defusing the ideology, I think they started this [inaudible] initiative, and then it failed a few months later. Few countries and governments, even Morocco with the Moroccis declaration – none of them succeeded to kind of find the solution to defuse political Islamists. When you – when you mentioned the combating the ideology, what would be new? Or can you elaborate on this a little?

GORKA: Yeah, absolutely, and look, you used the past tense. That's – that's not fair. You said, "They tried." They're doing it every day. I mean, my friends in Jordan, my friends in Egypt, my friends in Morocco, they're doing this every single day.

Nobody's given up and failed. But there are ways to do this. A white-skinned Catholic is not your best communicator for doing that, OK? But even I can say certain things.

What is the most important thing we brought back from Abbottabad, outside of bin Laden's body? Who knows? The most important thing? His hard drives. When you've got gigabytes of porn on your hard drive, you don't look like the great holy [inaudible] of jihad. When you've got multiple Pornhub accounts as the head of al-Qaeda – kind of undermines their ideology, doesn't it?

So, there are lots of powerful things. I would say our Muslim friends have the job of saying, "No, this is not Islam. Global jihad against the Jews, the apostates, and the Christians is not Islam." And then for people like me, my job is to say, "Do you really want to join a group that are a bunch of losers?" Because they are losers. The leadership of al-Qaeda is hiding now – the legacy al-Qaeda. I can't tell you where, but they're hiding. Why? Because they're afraid of us. Don't join a bunch of losers who are afraid of America. Join the winning side. Join us.

SCHANZER: The strong horse, as it were.

GORKA: "The Strong Horse", Lee Smith.

SCHANZER: "The Strong Horse."

GORKA: Totally.

SCHANZER: Exactly, Lee Smith.

Last question, and it's a little bit of a softball, but I understand that there is sort of a lanyard contest in your circles, and yours is apparently cooler than everybody else's. So, do you want to share with us?

GORKA: Well, I didn't bring a gift, so the best I can do – this is true. There is USG lanyard contest, and only the anointed are approved outside of my directorate. So I'm going to give you my lanyard.

SCHANZER: Oh, wow.

GORKA: I'm going to give you my lanyard. I'm going to hide my ID, and I'm going to give you my lanyard.

So, when we did that first operation for the president and we turned that ISIS leader into red mist, the president put out a tweet that went completely viral, with a phrase at the bottom of the tweet that we have abbreviated onto our lanyards. So, this is the NSCCT [National Security Council Counterterrorism] lanyard. I hope you're going to wear this, dude. And this is from his original tweet. "WWFYWWKY." This is quoting the president. "We Will Find You and We Will Kill You." Jonathan, your gift.

SCHANZER: I am – I'm honored.

(APPLAUSE)

All right. Oh, I think we've run out of time here. I want to thank you, Dr. Sebastian Gorka, for a – really, a fascinating conversation. A little bit of drama there too. But I want to thank you all for joining us here today in person and online. Really, this was fascinating. I learned a lot. And I think we even broke a little bit of news today, so I think that should be fun.

For more information on FDD and the latest analysis on these and other issues, we encourage you to visit *FDD.org*. We hope to see you again soon. Thanks for joining.

(APPLAUSE)

Thank you.