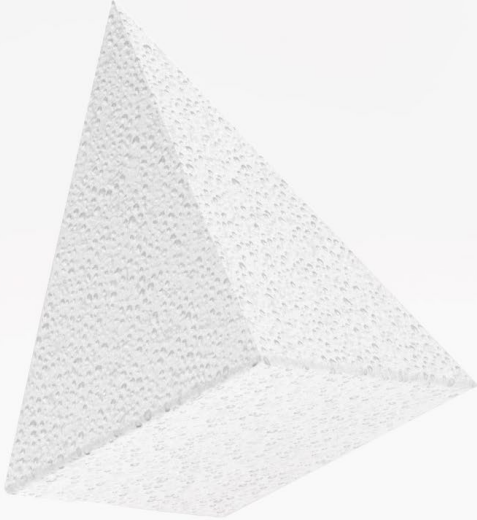
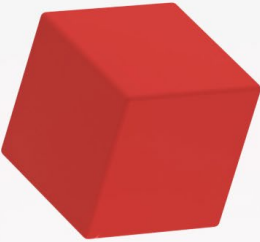
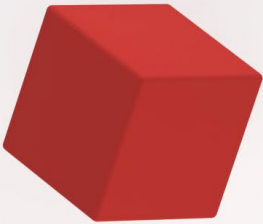


**Public Service and
Counter-Terrorism:
*A Conversation with
Christine Abizaid***



TNSR talks with Hon. Christine Abizaid, who recently served as the director of the National Counter-Terrorism Center. In this interview, Abizaid talks about her career in public service and the private sector, the craft of intelligence analysis, and current counter-terrorism challenges.

Editor's Note: *The Texas National Security Review is beginning to publish conversations with senior policymakers and leaders in public service as a part of the Strategist Section. We are honored that the first of these interviews is with Hon. Christine Abizaid. She recently departed government as the director of the National Counter-Terrorism Center. During the Obama administration, Abizaid served as deputy assistant secretary of defense for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia. Prior to that role, she served on the National Security Council Staff as both a director for counter-terrorism and senior policy advisor to the assistant to the president for homeland security and counter-terrorism. She also served for seven years with the Defense Intelligence Agency's Joint Intelligence Task Force Combating Terrorism in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Division and the Iraq/Middle East Division. During this time, she deployed several times throughout the Middle East. Abizaid holds a B.A. degree in Psychology from the University of California, San Diego and an M.A. degree in International Policy Studies from Stanford University. Among the awards she has received are the National Intelligence Distinguished Service Medal, the Central Intelligence Agency Director's Award, and the National Military Intelligence Association John T. Hughes Award.*

TNSR: You were in your early 20s on 9/11. I know that had an enormous impact on you.

Abizaid: I graduated from college and moved to Boston trying to figure out what I wanted to do. Did I want to be in advertising? Did I want to be in a law firm? How did I want to sort of shape my life? It was when I was a temp worker sitting in the basement of an architecture firm that 9/11 happened. I realized I was kind of running away from a calling in public service, a calling so many of my family had answered before me.

TNSR: If we re-ran the clock and 9/11 never happened, I wonder how different the configuration of people in D.C. and in national security would be. It would probably be a completely different set of people, such was the impact of that horrific day.

Abizaid: I think that's exactly right. So many people of my generation either came into government be-

cause of that day or pivoted to the counter-terrorism fight as a result. And to be honest, the government had to build from almost scratch a whole new enterprise that could deal with the post-9/11 environment. And now, those same people that were running the campaign against al-Qaeda are running our strategic competition work. They've been sort of forged in battle as part of the counter-terrorism community. But I think you're right: The look of today's leadership in national security has roots in that terrible day.

TNSR: I'd love to hear about your journey into public service.

Abizaid: In 2002, I started as an intelligence analyst with the Joint Intelligence Task Force for Combating Terrorism at the Defense Intelligence Agency. While I joined because of the attacks on 9/11, my first account was actually Palestinian terrorism, Hizballah, and Iranian state-sponsored terrorism. It was there I learned how to do counter-terrorism analysis on some of the most complicated non-state actors that are influenced by all of these state and geopolitical dynamics.

This early part of my career was not just post-9/11, but it was also pre-Iraq War. So, I was learning about intelligence tradecraft at a time when the intelligence community was under incredible pressure from the Bush administration to answer questions like: "Does Saddam Hussein have a relationship to al-Qaeda? Describe it and prove to us that this is all part of a greater problem."

That really stuck with me.

After that, I deployed to Iraq, where I was focused on al-Qaeda in Iraq as a senior analyst. I had the great fortune of working with Gen. Stanley McCrystal and his team as we were dealing with the aftereffects of the bombing against the Golden Mosque [a sacred Shia site that was bombed by al-Qaeda in Iraq]. And that's where I really cut my teeth on the Sunni side of our terrorism problem.

I continued working that account from the United States. About six years into my tenure at the Defense Intelligence Agency, I decided that I wanted to do something new with the knowledge I had gained. So, I went to graduate school. My experience at Stanford was really about exploring how I could transition from being in intelligence to being in policy.



I was fortunate enough to do that on the government's dime and after I graduated, I went back to the Defense Intelligence Agency where, for a short time, I worked on counter-terrorism challenges in Afghanistan, Pakistan, all of Asia. Next, I went to the National Security Council.

And that process of deep expertise distilled to keen insight is incredibly valuable for anybody learning to be analyst, as well as anybody who wants to be a future policymaker.

TNSR: Let's talk more about that idea of going from an intelligence officer to a policymaker and also the role, specifically, that academia played. As you know, TNSR is all about bringing practitioners and policymakers into conversation with scholars. How do you view scholarship and its role in policymaking or policy training?

Abizaid: It's critical. Stanford was a really good place to be both engaged on the academic side of national security work, but also be able to directly interact with very senior policymakers and practitioners who had actually been in the trenches and could translate, for example, the theory of deterrence to what that actually meant from a policy perspective. It was essential to me in bridging the gap, expanding beyond terrorism to think about the whole world of national security. The entire experience was a baseline for future work in policy.

TNSR: The late Henry Kissinger had this line about how in being in the academy, you are building up your intellectual capital, and then when you go into government, you're spending it down. Colin Kahl [former under secretary of defense for policy] says it is almost the opposite: that, yes, you're building up intellectual capital in the academy, but you're also building up tremendous intellectual capital in the policy world in a way that is impossible in the academy. Where do you come down on that?

Abizaid: I'm closer to Colin, but I do agree that when you're in government, you often don't have extended time to think deeply. Policymakers often need to rely on the academy to do the deep thinking, the long papers, the hard research questions, so people in government can take the two-page summary of it and make it into a smart policy decision. So much of foreign policy is about crisis management, decision-making on the fly, and finding the least bad option.

TNSR: You recently departed government as director of the National Counter-Terrorism Center. As you led this major analytical organization, how did you balance the need for having analysts do deep, longer-term thinking against the tyrannical needs of the present?

Abizaid: Our value-add as an intelligence organization is to do both deep thinking and crisis work on what intelligence is telling us. Our unique access to the exquisite information that the U.S. intelligence community collects provides us insight and perspective that is unique and needs to be shared. So, for example, when you're analyzing the effects of a

strike in downtown Kabul against Ayman al Zawahiri, you are taking your deep expertise and thinking and relating it to the urgent crisis. That's what's important about being the knowledge center for the U.S. government on all things counter-terrorism. And so, it's critical to manage historical knowledge in a way that reveals insights about where the threat is going. And in the last 20 years National Counter-Terrorism Center has built a baseline of tradecraft, analytic capability, and knowledge sharing unlike anything else in the world.

TNSR: Having worked at the tactical, strategic, and policy levels of intelligence, you must have invaluable thoughts on what makes a good analyst and the role of training and education in making that happen.

Abizaid: Being a good analyst is about not only establishing expertise and understanding deeply whatever the portfolio is that you've been assigned, but then being able to crystallize that information in a way that someone who doesn't have the time to listen to you can take what you know and make decisions on it. And that process of deep expertise distilled to keen insight is incredibly valuable for anybody learning to be analyst, as well as anybody who wants to be a future policymaker. I learned to distill hundreds of data points into what is most important at this moment. That's what all intelligence analysts need to learn. This stayed with me throughout my career in public service and in the private sector.

Analysis is actually quite transferable across portfolios. In the analytic world, some analysts want to be deep experts on one thing, while others want to be generalists. But once you've understood the process of mastering an account, the ability to communicate, write, brief, and react in the moment to what's most important translates across portfolios. So, when I mentioned earlier that so many of our strategic competition leaders cut their teeth in the

counter-terrorism world, that's actually good for the government.

TNSR: I'm interested to learn more about your experience in the private sector.

Abizaid: I worked for Dell Technologies, focused on global operational risk and geostrategic considerations for the future of the Dell footprint, as well as thinking through sustainability initiatives and the public policy goals that would most affect climate change or human rights issues. We did a lot of trade and related compliance work.

I would say it was one of the hardest transitions I ever made. When I transferred out of government into the private sector, it was a whole other world. I was not sure that I was cut out for it. It took me at least three months to start understanding what the heck people were talking about every day, and more time to really understand that the mission that drew me to the U.S. government in the first place was actually something that I could serve from the private sector. That was really important for me to realize as I looked to make impact outside of the government. And I learned a lot there. I left my role at Dell Technologies a much better leader than I would have been had I not had that experience. I am grateful for that.

TNSR: What are some of the most important leadership lessons that you learned at Dell that you brought into government with you when you went back in?

Abizaid: One of the main ones was leadership with a face to it and, through that, communication and intentional engagement with the workforce. I grew up in a government setting where it was highly hierarchical. Everything feeds up, and your leaders are a position before they are a person. What I found in the private sector was that inspiring people to work for you is as much about you creating an openness and a relationship with them as it is about the mission and what you're asking them to do. And for a place like the National Counter-Terrorism Center, everything is about mission. They are there to protect Americans from our terrorist adversaries everywhere across the globe. Mission is not hard, but connection can be. One of the things I spent a lot of time doing was getting to know my organization, my analysts, my team, letting them know who I was, and becoming better because of those relationships. That's something I wouldn't have done had I not experienced it and appreciated it in the private sector.

TNSR: Like all other major government organizations, the National Counter-Terrorism Center works with private industry. How did your time in industry inform that aspect of leading the organization?

Abizaid: Working at a technology company, you see how small amounts of insight benefit the whole ecosystem. Sharing of knowledge that allows the private sector to benefit from the government and the government to benefit from the private sector is critical in navigating counter-terrorism and various other issues. Often, we in the government just think we have to push information out, but creating an exchange of information where we're learning from each other is incredibly important. And I learned how much companies know about their business and how valuable that can be for the U.S. government trying to protect its people and its national interest.

This also goes back to your earlier question about what analysts of the future need. The way that we do intelligence analysis can be very specific, highly reliant on certain source reporting that tells a story. But it needs to be better informed by data. There is so much data out there that can help us focus on the most important pieces of what we know, much of it in the private sector. If we can gather information and garner insights via other sources of information, we shouldn't be wasting time with our exquisite capability to collect on it. And so how we integrate data analysis into our products so that we're telling the best and most complete story, that we're not so reliant on just intelligence collection, but also bringing in what the entire open-source world can tell us is a critically important transition that the intelligence community has to make. And it has to do this while being respectful of privacy and civil liberties as well.

The United States has to have a sustainable architecture to deal with that persistent challenge, and the trick for our counter-terrorism practitioners will be to make sure we have what we need without asking for the world.

TNSR: Whether in the *Texas National Security Review* or *War on the Rocks*, we are constantly reminded that we live in an era of great-power competition. We've been through a couple cycles now where we thought terrorism was fading into the background. I'd say one of those was in the immediate aftermath of the initial withdrawal from Iraq in 2010. At the time, there was also



great optimism about the surge in Afghanistan. Then the Islamic State came to the fore in Syria and Iraq until it was essentially defeated. And now Russia and China are at the forefront.

We always think we're going to leave terrorism behind, until it comes back with a vengeance. You have been director of the National Counter-Terrorism Center during this focus on great-power competition. Please tell me about how you think about terrorism and counter-terrorism in that context.

Abizaid: We were constantly dealing with this question at the National Counter-Terrorism Center. We are not in the immediate post-9/11 era. We had counter-terrorism at the forefront of our national security strategy for at least a decade, and then sometime after, especially with the rise of the Islamic State. Is that necessary in perpetuity? I think the answer is no. The question is: What's the right balance? How do you pursue counter-terrorism interests with the right balance that allows others to focus on the aspects of strategic competition or other priorities in a way that still sustains progress against a persistent and evolving threat?

I once asked my team to help me understand today's counter-terrorism volume of information versus the

kind of counter-terrorism information we were dealing with at the height of U.S. efforts against al-Qaeda. They went back and looked at the incoming traffic into our watch center just as a proxy for this. And they found that we are dealing with the same amount of information today on the counter-terrorism threat — the same number of accepted cables that come through our system that reflect real, important information about the character of that threat — as we did the year that we killed Osama Bin Laden.

The United States has to have a sustainable architecture to deal with that persistent challenge, and the trick for our counter-terrorism practitioners will be to make sure we have what we need without asking for the world. In the immediate post-9/11 era, we got everything we wanted and more. We have been in a correction, especially over the last five years across two different administrations, trying to find a balance. It's not either/or. And in fact, if the United States is not effective in its counter-terrorism approach, priority issues like strategic competition risk falling by the wayside.

Look at the last pivot to Asia. It was interrupted by the rise of the Islamic State. Today, the Middle East has been a huge distraction from the incredibly important strategic priority of the Indo-Pacific because of a terrorist attack in southern Israel a year ago.

We've got to be smart about maintaining our counter-terrorism defenses, maintaining our capability, keeping our eye on the ball — understanding that the challenge is dynamic, it is persistent, and we are always going to take care of that in the background even as we talk about and pursue as priority other national interests.

TNSR: How important do you think Oct. 7 and the campaign since in Gaza were as a radicalizing “great cause” for the jihadist movement?

Abizaid: My job in the first two years of my tenure was completely different than the last year of my tenure when we were dealing with the post-Oct. 7 environment. I am convinced that that day and the conflict that it precipitated will have consequences for generations, whether on future groups or individuals and their pathway to mobilization to violence.

It also happened at a time when we were already dealing with a diverse array of actors. Iran and Hizballah still presented a threat. In fact, Iran was probably more brazen than ever in its attempts to retaliate for the death of Qasem Soleimani with assassination plotting, including in the U.S. homeland. Hizballah still has a global terrorist capability, even though it's not one that it often uses. You've got al-Qaeda that was trying to find its footing, especially after the death of Zawahiri, but still with capability out of places like Yemen and Syria, as well as rising challenges in Somalia and the Sahel. The Islamic State, disaggregated from its core central leadership structure in Iraq and Syria, had been creating pockets of capability all over the world, including in Africa and South and Central Asia. On top of that, we had a rise in racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists, many of which were able to exploit rising anti-Semitism.

All of that existed before Oct. 7, and when Hamas conducted its attack, it breathed new life into all of those movements. They all find some purchase point in Hamas' attack to create a rallying cry, to generate finances, to recruit new members. And that's just with the groups and ideologies that are defined and well-known.

This disaggregated, diverse, and geographically dispersed threat is going to be shaped in the next decade by what's happening now in the Middle East. For example, whether the Houthis ever go back to being the group that we knew before Oct. 7 is a really big question.

TNSR: That's an interesting case. The Houthis have been an insurgency that now governs large parts of Yemen, and has also been viewed through

the counter-terrorism lens, and from there they went from being the U.S. Navy's problem.

Abizaid: In a way, after Oct. 7, they finally found their place in the Iranian-sponsored movements that compose the so-called “axis of resistance.” Now, the question is where they take it from here. If there is a ceasefire deal in Gaza that ideally also leads to a de-escalation with Hizballah, what will the Houthis do, especially over the long term? What place do they want to occupy in a future that could look very different from their past?

There's a global community that is generating and inciting the kind of violence that you see, not just from racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists, but anti-government, anti-authority movements.

TNSR: I don't know how precise you're able to be about this, but is there a rough breakdown of how focused the National Counter-Terrorism Center is on Islamist groups versus other kinds of violence extremists and terrorists?

Abizaid: As I mentioned, at the start of my career, I was focused on Iran-related actors and then later al-Qaeda, then the Islamic State. When I came back to the National Counter-Terrorism Center after a four-year break from government, the newest phenomenon, for me as a counter-terrorism professional, was the rise of racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists. And it is a transnational phenomenon even though countries — including our own — were thinking about it in their own domestic contexts.

There's a global community that is generating and inciting the kind of violence that you see, not just from racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists, but anti-government, anti-authority movements. It's on the rise and it's killed a lot of Americans in the last 10 years, especially when you look at it relative to the traditional foreign terrorist organizations that we track.

This threat tends to present through lone actors, but they do not just appear out of the blue. They are connected to small cells or online communities where they are incited to act, for instance, by an organization like the Terrorgram network, which features in recent federal criminal charges against several Americans.

The National Counter-Terrorism Center spends a lot of time in conversation with international partners

about such actors in Europe, Southeast Asia, and even in South America. Our license to engage in intelligence analysis on purely domestic counter-terrorism issues is circumscribed for important reasons, but we did engage to understand the threat to the homeland in the context of how this is developing internationally.

TNSR: What were your best and worst days as director of the National Counter-Terrorism Center?

Abizaid: The best days were often the worst days. I think back to the fall of Kabul, and the screening and vetting requirements and all the work the National Counter-Terrorism Center had to do to track threats on the ground in Afghanistan even as we were trying to make sure that individuals that were coming out of Afghanistan were not known or suspected terrorists. This required 24/7 operations, with volunteers from across the intelligence community. It required an amazing amount of effort from the entirety of the National Counter-Terrorism Center.

Watching us come together to be able to deal with the crisis at pace was inspiring. I saw that purpose-driven, mission-first focus on the center time and again, whether when dealing with attacks, or a number of disrupted plots, or high-value target operations — I got to see the people at my organization shine with no expectation of recognition and every motivation to protect the American people. And so, the best days and the worst days often come all at once.

TNSR: Given so many TNSR readers are academics, how would you advise scholars who don't yet have any government experience but very much want their work to be policy relevant and practitioner relevant?

Abizaid: When I was a deputy assistant secretary of defense, I experienced academics doing amazing work that could inform policy in some strategic and sometimes tactical ways. It was enormously valuable. But many of them thought their work did not matter unless they got it to the secretary of defense or the national security advisor. Their goal was always to shoot really high up. But that misses a whole series of decision-makers who will shape the way the secretary of defense thinks or will shape the way the national security advisor can absorb the information and work it into policy proposals for the president. Engagement with lower and mid-levels of the Defense Department, for example, is so important. That's where academics can find people who want to be educated — ideally succinctly — and are looking for good ideas where they can find it so they can use it to craft the right outcome for the United States. Whether it is deputy assistant secretaries,

civil servants, or military personnel, they need your insight and can use it. Find a way to get it to them in a format that allows them to efficiently absorb it, and that can have a big impact, if not an immediate splash, on what we do as a country. 🇺🇸

This interview was lightly edited for clarity.

Image: The White House¹

¹ For the image, see [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:P20210727AS-1107_\(51441324644\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:P20210727AS-1107_(51441324644).jpg).

