

ISSUE BRIEF | Center for Homeland Security & Immigration

HOW OUR OPEN BORDER LEAVES US MORE VULNERABLE TO TERRORISM

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TOPLINE POINTS

- ★ The present-day war in Israel should be a wakeup call to Americans about how the open southern border has significantly increased our Nation's vulnerability to terror attacks.
- ★ For years, Islamic terrorists have formed alliances with Latin American regimes and drug cartels to further their organized crime. Recent reports suggest they are exploiting our unsecure border to target Americans more directly.
- ★ To protect Americans from dangerous cartels and terrorists, we must reverse course from the Biden Administration's failed policies and secure the border to stop national security and public safety threats from entering unlawfully.

Introduction

In the early morning of October 7, 2023, the Nation of Israel suffered a major breach of its military and intelligence systems, perpetrated by the Islamist terrorist group Hamas. The attack was shocking for many reasons, including that Israel is known for having one of the most secure borders in the world and an unrivaled intelligence network. Almost immediately following these attacks, Americans began raising questions about the potential for an attack on our homeland. They are right to do so because homeland security is national security. But, in the past 33 months, the Biden Administration has dismantled the security of our Nation's borders, creating a national security crisis where bad actors are far less deterred by our border today than they might have been in the past. The Biden Administration's weak leadership on the border and against terrorism, especially state sponsors of terrorism, leaves our Nation vulnerable to a terror attack.

An Overview of Key Vulnerabilities

Our porous borders make us critically vulnerable to a terror attack on the homeland. Here's why:

1. At least **1.7 million known “gotaways”** have come across our border unimpeded in the past 33 months. Under Biden Administration policies, millions of illegal aliens are surrendering themselves at the border, making fraudulent asylum claims, and being released into American communities. Those who go to lengths to bypass Border Patrol agents instead of turning themselves in likely have a variety of nefarious reasons to do so. In September 2023, former Border Patrol Chief Rodney Scott testified before Congress that cartels and gang members use large groups of [migrants to distract Border Patrol](#) while they sneak drugs and bad actors into our country.
2. Over the past two years, **U.S. Customs and Border Protection confirmed they have apprehended 72,823 “special interest aliens” (SIAs)** from mostly Middle Eastern countries at the southern border. According to [the Department of Homeland Security \(DHS\)](#), these SIAs “potentially pose a national security risk to the United States or its interests” and are often “employing travel patterns known or evaluated to possibly have a nexus to terrorism.” These numbers include 538 aliens from Syria and 659 aliens from Iran, two key state sponsors of terror. It also lists 6,386 aliens from Afghanistan (currently run by the Taliban), 164 from Lebanon (home of Hezbollah), 139 from Yemen (home of the Houthi Rebels and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula), 1,613 from Pakistan (which harbors ISIS-K) among others.
3. At least **282 Known or Suspected Terrorists (KSTs)** have been apprehended by Border Patrol while crossing into the U.S. illegally since the beginning of the Biden Administration. By comparison, the Trump Administration apprehended 12 KSTs over four years. More KSTs are attempting to cross the border because they are aware it is unsecured, and this is the easiest avenue to make it inside the U.S. These high apprehension numbers are key indicators of a failed border strategy, which has incentivized more attempted unlawful entry. Although more KSTs and SIAs are being caught, many more are likely getting through.
4. There are reports of **completely unattended ports of entry** at our northern border, which spans more than 5,000 miles. This inadequate supervision in the north is a byproduct of the Biden Administration redeploying Border Patrol agents from their duties along the northern border to process illegal aliens at the southern border beginning in 2021. The northern border is so overwhelmed and



understaffed that bad actors could enter our Nation unlawfully without detection from law enforcement, leaving American communities more vulnerable to attack.

5. Caravans of illegal migrants are surging to the border and show no signs of abating. In the past 33 months, **more than 6 million illegal aliens** have been apprehended at the southern border, with the Biden Administration allowing several million of these illegal aliens to be released into American communities. Concerningly, many are working and military-aged men, and some with gang affiliations have already **committed** brutal attacks against innocent Americans. With such a high volume of illegal aliens at the border, DHS cannot vet everyone completely before release, meaning that public safety threats are being allowed into the country.
6. After the U.S. hastily withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021, at least **100,000 unvetted, visa-less Afghans were allowed into our country**. The Biden Administration **did not follow** procedures to screen and vet applicants for the Special Immigrant Visa, for which most of them likely did not qualify. A 2022 **report** by the Office of Inspector General at DHS stated that U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) “allowed some evacuees who were not fully vetted to ... enter the United States with derogatory information,” meaning a background as a known or suspected terrorist, a criminal, or an immigration violator. Instead of removing these inadmissible aliens, the Biden Administration is allowing them to stay in the U.S. through immigration **parole**.
7. The **Mexican drug cartels** have been **financially enriched** by the Biden Administration’s open border policies. In 2022, their profit from human trafficking and smuggling alone increased by 2,500% from 2018. These cartels, which are Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs), are responsible for smuggling millions of migrants and deadly fentanyl across the southern border. The cartels have also historically worked and currently work with Islamic terrorist groups to enhance their illicit activities, providing them a foothold to attack us. Any situation where the cartels are strong and empowered represents a significant national security concern to our country.
8. CBP has **released over 95% of all inadmissible aliens** (266,846) who used the CBP One App to enter our country, including individuals from countries of concern. This includes Iran, a leading state sponsor of terror, and additional countries such as Afghanistan, Venezuela and Uzbekistan which harbor the Taliban, ISIS, and other terrorist groups.



The Latin American Regimes & Drug Cartels' Collaboration with Islamic Terrorists and the Iranian Regime

To understand the alliances among Latin American regimes, Latin American drug cartels, and Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs), it is necessary to focus on the motivations these groups have in common. The cartels and FTOs both reap benefits from partnering to further their illicit drug trade. For FTOs, drug smuggling acts as a convenient cover to finance terror. Some Latin American regimes, such as Venezuela and Colombia, are involved in drug smuggling but may have ties to terrorists for ideological, more than financial, reasons. Details on criminal cooperation between these entities remain classified, but publicly available information suggests multifaceted connections among some of the most compromised regimes, deadliest TCOs, and fanatic FTOs right across our borders.

A primary example is Hezbollah, the Shiite militant group based in Lebanon, which is largely funded by the Iranian regime. Before al-Qaeda perpetrated the 9/11 attacks, Hezbollah had [killed](#) more Americans than any other terrorist group, and they have also been caught plotting to kill Americans multiple times. For example, in 2019, a highly trained Hezbollah sleeper agent named Ali Kourani was [convicted](#) for his intelligence gathering in New York City airports and at other potential targets for an attack. Kourani was [smuggled](#) across the U.S. southern border from Tijuana into California by a Hezbollah-affiliated man who smuggled more than 300 Lebanese aliens into the U.S. over a three-year period. In 2017, Samer El Debek was [arrested](#) in Michigan for helping Hezbollah plot attacks on Americans and Israelis. Hezbollah—and, by extension, Iran—has [global criminal networks](#) that extend into Latin America. Taking advantage of the Lebanese diaspora in North and South America, Hezbollah successfully extorts Lebanese-owned businesses, has laundered hundreds of [millions](#) of dollars of drug money through the Lebanese Canadian Bank, and has raised massive amounts of revenue through elaborate drug and cigarette smuggling.

Unsurprisingly, Hezbollah has historically allied with Venezuelan and Colombian cartels to expand their cocaine trade and money laundering operations. Their [involvement](#) with the Medellin cartel is well documented, as is their [cooperation](#) with the Venezuelan regime, which facilitates a foothold for their global crime-terror operations.

Venezuela and Colombia are top concerns to the U.S. due to their well-documented connections to Hezbollah and the Iranian regime. In 2011, the Foreign Policy Research Institute [reported](#) that Colombia's Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Hezbollah, and al-Qaeda "all have training camps, recruiting bases and networks of mutual assistance in Venezuela as well as throughout the continent." In a troubling 2011 congressional testimony, Latin America expert Douglas Farah [noted](#), "One thing both Hezbollah and the FARC have in common is a demonstrated willingness to work with



outside groups that do not share their same ideology or theology, but who share a common enemy.” The Maduro regime also reportedly has deep ties with the Mexican Jalisco Cartel and Sinaloa Cartel due to their alliance on the cocaine trade. By flooding the U.S. with cocaine, the Venezuelans, Hezbollah, and Hamas [aimed](#) to cause “instability, addiction and death.” The threat of Iranian terrorism coming to our shores is not just hypothetical, unfortunately.

Examples of spies and terrorists working with Latin American drug cartels independent of the drug trade are plain. In 2011, the DEA uncovered a plot by which an Iranian agent tried to recruit a member of the “Los Zetas” Mexican cartel to [assassinate](#) the Saudi Arabian ambassador and attack the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C. The same year, Hezbollah [opened](#) a center of operations in Cuba, reportedly to establish a terror cell that would include 23 operatives, helping to collect intelligence, conduct networking, and document forgery. Additionally, the Mexican drug cartels are known to hire mercenaries for advanced training and weapons acquisition and to support their illicit operations. In the past, they have poached U.S. [soldiers](#), Mexican [Special Forces](#), and other [overseas actors](#) from their previous positions, offering them large sums of cash in return. It is not unimaginable that they would recruit Islamic terrorists, considering the overlapping rogue nature of their roles. Even former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton [believed](#) the Mexican cartels were beginning to use tactics of terrorists and insurgency groups, including car bombings and paramilitary organizations, indicating concerns that the U.S. was facing a narco-terrorist threat. Considering the significant sums of money the cartels have amassed from the Biden Administration’s open border policies. It would not be surprising if they have been using these funds to recruit mercenaries to further their aims.

Terrorists Infiltrating our Homeland through the Southern Border

Terrorists have global networks that operate beyond their home bases in the Middle East and Africa. Alarmingly, they are already inside major American cities, and more are expected to try to cross the southern border. Just recently, the San Francisco Field Office Intelligence Unit (part of CBP) [warned](#) that terrorists inspired by the current Israel-Hamas conflict may attempt to enter the U.S. through the southern border. In August 2023, a human smuggler operating in Mexico with ties to ISIS reportedly [assisted](#) at least a dozen Uzbekistan Special Interest Aliens (SIAs) over the southern border. These migrants claimed asylum and were let into our country with the large groups of migrants that have been surging across the border over the past two years. If the Biden Administration had control over the border, these aliens would have been detained while CBP figured out who they were. Aliens from Uzbekistan are classified as SIAs because their citizens have committed terrible terrorist attacks on the U.S. in the name of ISIS, such as Sayfullo Habibullaevic Saipov’s 2017 Manhattan truck [attack](#) and Abdurasul Hasanovich Juraboev’s [threats](#) to kill President Barack Obama in 2015. These attackers exploited the legal immigration system to gain entry into the U.S., but the Uzbeks that



recently entered through our Southern border illegally correctly calculated that this route is now the easiest.

With the [recent breakdown](#) of counterterrorism measures like security vetting and border patrolling, terrorists are incentivized to enter by unlawfully crossing the southern border, as their behavior patterns demonstrate. Over the past two years, there were [over 13,000 SIAs](#) from Uzbekistan apprehended by U.S. Border Patrol agents while crossing illegally into the U.S. The record 282 known or suspected terrorists attempting to cross our borders during the Biden Administration is another indicator of the vulnerabilities posed by our unsecured border. The asylum system has also been exploited by bad actors intending to harm Americans. In 2022, Iraqi citizen and former al Qaeda fighter Shihab Ahmed Shihab claimed asylum after overstaying his visa and was subsequently arrested for [plotting](#) to assassinate former President George W. Bush. His terror plot [included](#) plans for four terrorists to enter Brazil first, then travel north, paying the cartels for passage through the Darien Gap and to the U.S. border, possibly wearing fake Border Patrol uniforms. At the time he was planning the attack, Shihab had already [smuggled](#) two members of Hezbollah over the border. In 2005, two members of Hamas, Mahmoud Khalil and Ziad Saleh, were [caught](#) and arrested in Los Angeles after they each paid a smuggler \$10,000 to take them across the border.

With all this said, it is extremely plausible that terrorist groups have already successfully entered through our open southern border undetected in the past two years. Yet some are downplaying the threat as a conspiracy theory. In September 2023, the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration Integrity, Security, and Enforcement held a hearing titled “Terrorist Entry Through the Southwest Border,” which examined the national security implications of the Biden Administration’s border crisis. Although valid arguments were repeatedly raised by witnesses and House Republicans, members of the left downplayed these concerns, arguing that the number of potential terrorists apprehended at the border was trivial compared to the total number of asylum seekers. In the media, a *Rolling Stone* piece [stated](#), “To suggest that a significant number [of Hamas terrorists] have escaped the region, crossed half the globe and then secretly traversed the hazardous Mexico border into the U.S. is far-fetched in the extreme.” This logic is not only poorly informed but dangerous in that it leads to complacency about a serious evil. The Hamas Covenant of 1988, for instance, states that their cause against the Jews “needs all sincere efforts... until the enemy is vanquished, and Allah's victory is realized.” Islamic terrorists know that America is in their way of achieving their objective, and because of this, they target us. To think that Hamas’s only way to inflict terror on the U.S. is with a massive army of their own people traveling to our southern border is naïve.



The America First Response

The [rise of terrorism globally](#), as well as major terrorist plots uncovered in our homeland, suggest that bad actors will continue trying to attack innocent Americans. What will determine their success are the security measures we take at home and abroad to secure our borders and deter bad actors. It is far past time to build a decisive and proactive strategy to counter potential terrorism at home. Here are the steps our federal government should take immediately:

First, we need to secure our physical borders. Specifically, the federal government should

- Resume construction of the border wall system, which is a needed barrier to deter unlawful entry and disrupt illicit cartel activity.
- Get Border Patrol agents back on the line patrolling the border instead of processing illegal aliens for release into the country, which will prevent gotaways from evading them in their attempts to sneak into the U.S.
- End the current nationwide catch-and-release scheme that incentivizes more migrants to be smuggled or trafficked to the southern border.

Second, we need to take practical steps to stop terrorists from penetrating our borders:

- Re-institute national security travel bans to keep out terrorists, jihadists, and violent extremists, starting with Syria, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen.
- Re-implement a uniform security and information-sharing baseline that all nations must meet in order for their nationals to be able to travel or emigrate to the United States.
- Suspend refugee resettlement from the world's most dangerous and terror-afflicted regions and boost refugee screening processes, ensuring proper vetting of all foreign nationals, with no exceptions.
- Reissue sanctions on countries that fail to take back their own nationals.
- Re-prioritize intelligence gathering in Mexico and other parts of the tri-border area where current operations fall far short of the threat level. Conducting investigations in the region will better inform the military and law enforcement about cartel and terrorist activity.

Third, we must stop funding state sponsors of terrorism. Gifting the Iranian regime billions of dollars only strengthens their terror proxies to inflict harm on Americans and our allies. Specifically, we should:



- Re-impose the Trump Administration’s “maximum pressure” sanctions on Iran and conduct robust enforcement to bring Iran’s oil exports to zero and deny the regime its principal source of revenue.
- Re-impose sanctions and additional consequences on Venezuela for acting as Iran’s foothold into Latin America.
- Investigate and remove members of the Iran Experts Initiative, an Iranian influence operation, from the U.S. government, including sensitive jobs at the Pentagon.
- Expand Financial Intelligence Unit cooperation in the Americas to our allies in the Gulf states, such as the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman, to limit Iran and Hezbollah’s worldwide money-laundering operations more effectively.

Conclusion

The threat of terrorism is serious and is not going to disappear in any of our lifetimes. The Trump Administration recognized this and went on offense to actively prevent a terror attack at home. It secured the border, properly vetted all foreign nationals entering our Nation, and equipped Border Patrol to enforce the law. These are practical, commonsense measures that every elected representative should endorse as a fulfillment of their oath of office to protect the American people. But the Biden Administration has abandoned commonsense measures and implemented a policy of blatant nonenforcement at the border, allowing unvetted foreign nationals into our cities and communities. It is only a matter of time before we see the devastating consequences that follow from underestimating this threat.



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