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The NCITEr Newsletter: August 2022

National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center

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THE NCITeR

National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center | A U.S. Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence

AUGUST 2022

Dear NCITE Community,

This newsletter comes on the heels of stunning news: President Biden tells us tonight that al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, "who carved a trail of murder and violence," was killed in a counterterrorism operation in Afghanistan.

Al-Zawahiri played significant roles in the terrorist organization, helping plan the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Africa, the U.S.S. Cole in 2000, and the Sept. 11 attacks in the U.S. He also launched a major biological weapons program in the years following. When Osama bin Laden was killed in 2011, al-Zawahiri took over as leader.

For many of us who got into this field after the 9/11 attacks, this news is important in more ways than I can articulate here.

It is times like these when I look to the academic experts I trust to make sense of what comes next – fragmentation, more violence, reduced capacity, or some combination of all of it.

I am grateful to have an active research program on malign and violent extremist leaders here at NCITE, and I am eager to read and amplify what our other [consortium experts](#) Austin Doctor, Sam Hunter, Lorenzo Vidino, Seamus Hughes, Martha Crenshaw, Evan Perkoski, Shane Connelly, Victor Asal, and Shiraz Maher have to say about what his death means for the future of this group and broader movement.

For now, I feel most grateful for the intelligence and counterterrorism professionals who have worked the past 20 years to find al-Zawahiri — the person who was the right hand of Osama bin Laden and actively led al-Qaida in its pursuit to harm the United States.

Like the U.S. counterterrorism apparatus, the United Kingdom has dedicated significant resources to preventing and countering terrorism such as the threat al-Zawahiri posed.

I recently attended the CREST Behavioral and Social Sciences in Security (BASS) research conference, held at Lancaster University. CREST, or Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats, is our sister center in the U.K. It is funded by the

British government to develop research to support and inform the way security operations are conducted and determine what evidence underlies policy changes.

I spent three days with the best security researchers in the U.K., Canada, and the European Union. We heard about new advancements in risk assessment for extremism, ways to deter and disrupt devoted actors, and how to assess information in a digital world.

I was struck by at least three ways this conference strengthened the fabric of the security community abroad.

First, a specific focus was made on disseminating cutting-edge CREST research. Through lightning talks, panels, long-form talks, and posters, not one moment was wasted at this conference. Bravo.

Second, organizers focused on networking between government and researchers. The U.K. government offices in attendance were engaged — they asked difficult questions about implementation, measurement, and of course — *how does this help me in my job?*

Third, a concerted effort was made to develop early-career researchers (ECRs). Leading up to the conference, the CREST team prepared this group through workshops about how to share a pitch for their research. It paid off — they were poised, passionate, and prepared. Stay tuned for how we can implement this via NCITE for our own early-career researchers.

The BASS conference did best what all conferences aim for — it strengthened and reinforced the community. In a time when our lives have been disrupted by COVID-19 and remote work, it was refreshing to share afternoon tea with the leading minds in security research. Most of all, it inspired me for what we can do in the U.S. through our now 26-university member NCITE consortium.

In this issue of the NCITEr, you will read about our Year 3 projects. We were able to fund **eight** new projects this year, and with continued research efforts with us since Day 1, we have a total **20** projects.

We continue to focus on the measurement of emerging threats, as well as what ways we can support the government in countering and preventing them. You will read about one new research thread pulled by our own Austin Doctor, NCITE director of counterterrorism initiatives. His story of field work in Iraq feels particularly poignant today.

Finally, you will read how the importance of your work was illustrated by a senior leader visit from DHS – Deputy Secretary John Tien, who took time out of a packed schedule to encourage and inspire a group of students – NCITE’s early career researchers and practitioners. As Deputy Secretary Tien shared and I echo, researching how to prevent and stop terrorism in our communities is one of the most important callings we can answer.

Today I feel that stronger than ever, and I hope you do too.



GINA LIGON
NCITE Center Director



Happy New Year! **NCITE launches Year 3 with 20 projects**

Terrorism in the metaverse. Terrorist recruitment. Threats against public officials. Election-motivated violent extremism. The trauma of studying terrorism.

These are some of the new research topic areas NCITE has folded into its portfolio as the consortium enters its third year.

For NCITE's first two years, the consortium held steady with the same principal investigators, research institutions, and research topics. This was for stability.

With plans to open up the research portfolio for Year 3, NCITE began planning months ago, launching a robust Request for Proposals process in February. NCITE received 44 submissions at the March deadline. Selection involved a careful process with NCITE's internal scientific review and DHS's relevancy review. A \$1 million plus up in NCITE's cooperative agreement — the primary research funding stream — enabled NCITE to select more projects than planned.

The result is 20 projects, a mix of ongoing research that began in 2020 with eight new ones added. The full list is on our website.

Y3 Projects

A top DHS official visits Omaha, requests sit-down with next-gen researchers: students



Photo courtesy UNO. DHS Deputy Secretary John Tien meets UNO rising sophomore and NCITE student worker Eva Burklund.

By Eva Burklund
NCITE student

As I sat only a few feet from the second most powerful person at the Department of Homeland Security, all I could really feel (other than mild panic) was gratitude for being able to share NCITE's story.

DHS Deputy Secretary John Tien, a decorated U.S. Army veteran who served four presidents and worked for one of the biggest banks in the United States, asked what I, a 19-year-old from Nebraska, was doing to help solve pressing issues.

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NCITE researcher's field work took him to Iraq



Photo courtesy Austin Doctor. Austin Doctor spent half of July in the Netherlands and Iraq for a project he's leading on best practices on repatriating foreign fighter families.

By Eva Burklund
NCITE student

On his second day in Iraq, Austin Doctor attended a funeral of two men killed by the Islamic State.

The UNO assistant professor of political science and NCITE director of counterterrorism research initiatives had just flown into the Middle Eastern country to talk to policy makers and officials about what to do with foreign fighters who left home to fight for the Islamic State (IS), some of whom had brought their families with them.

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NCITE was proud to host its first Summer Research Team or SRT. SRTs are professor-student teams from federally designated Minority Serving Institutions that embed with DHS Centers of Excellence. Read more about what they do [here](#).

A three-person team from the University of Texas at El Paso came to NCITE this summer. Alyssa Quesada and Alexa Oaxaca are rising seniors at UTEP majoring in computer information systems. Together, with UTEP Professor Waymond Rodgers (accounting and information systems), they have been looking at a decision-making computer model of Jan. 6 cases to develop insight on the decision process of those involved.

In addition to their research education, the students said they have benefited from the experience of living somewhere away from home.

"This is the longest that I have been away from home on my own, and it is has been a challenging, but also rewarding experience," said Oaxaca, who misses the mountains and desert country of south Texas but found she loved seeing "so much green" in Omaha.

Quesada said as "nervous as I was to leave" Texas, she has "gained a new sense of independence that I'm excited to take back home with me."

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Mapping Militants Project

NCITE researchers **Martha Crenshaw** (Stanford University) and **Iris Malone** (George Washington University) continue to build out their Mapping Militants Project (MMP), an online resource that traces the evolution and interaction of militant organizations over time. In addition to interactive maps, the MMP provides in-depth profiles of violent extremist organizations. These profiles contain information about groups' history, organization, strategy, attack history, interactions, and relationships with other groups. This year, the team created profiles for the Proud Boys, Azov Battalion, Patriot Prayer, and QAnon – some of which have received thousands of views.

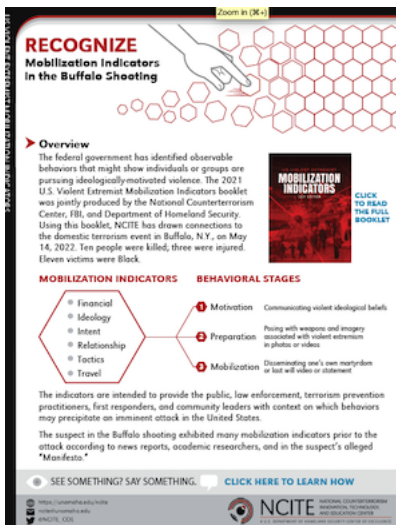


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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

How to spot mobilization indicators

This quick-turn document was produced following the May 14 terrorist attack in Buffalo, N.Y., when an 18-year-old New York man allegedly shot 13 people, killing 10. Eleven of the victims were black. The mass shooting is what the federal government calls Racially and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremism (REMVE), one of the deadliest kinds of terrorism. It can be hard to explain the unexplainable: why the alleged gunman would be so full of anger that he would take innocent lives. NCITE prepared a tool to share government resources that might not be widely known.



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UPCOMING EVENTS

NCITE Meet the Experts: Paul Gill

August 30

Gill is a senior lecturer at University College London's Department of Security and Crime Science. His research focus is terrorist behavior. His published works cover lone-actor terrorism, threat management and risk assessment, radicalization, impact of counterterrorism, and more.

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NCITE Annual Conference

NCITE is hosting a two-day hybrid in-person-virtual conference Oct. 27-28 in Omaha.

Invitations to the conference will be extended soon with details on accommodations. It is open to NCITE's research partners, students, stakeholders and select others. Agenda to come!

ICYMI



NCITE celebrated its first cohort of graduates in May. Pictured, from left, are Byron Moore, Liz Bender, Alexa Callahan, Lauren O'Malley, and Vignesh Murugavel.

By Eva Burklund
NCITE student

Since saying farewell to UNO and NCITE in May, the first cohort of NCITE alumni have moved on to an array of careers in business, government, and academia. Two NCITE alumni, Alexa Callahan and Byron Moore, have entered vastly different fields after graduation.

Callahan, who just completed her bachelor's degree in psychology, will begin a Ph.D. program at Sam Houston State University.

"I am just going full steam ahead straight into my Ph.D. which is kind of intimidating," Callahan said. "I had people tell me there's no way that you'll get into a Ph.D. program..."

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Jenni Hesterman visits NCITE, speaks about soft targets

National security expert Jenni Hesterman visited NCITE and gave two talks — one to NCITE faculty and students on what it was like to be a woman in her field and another on emerging threats and soft targets. This was given in person, streamed live to an DHS audience, and opened to the news media.

LEARN MORE & WATCH HERE

INSIDE NCITE



NCITE Excellence Fund

NCITE has established an account through the University of Nebraska Foundation as a step toward long-term sustainability. The fund will support students, researchers, and the UNO-based center as it strives to build community and national resilience against terrorism and targeted violence.

The UNO NCITE Excellence Fund (01159320) accepts funds electronically through the link below, or contributions may be mailed in name of the fund to 1010 Lincoln Mall Ste 300; Lincoln, NE 68508.

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Interesting people? Upcoming events?

Send ideas for our next NCITEr edition to NCITE's egrace@unomaha.edu.



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