

Operation Citadel:

Enabling the Interagency Approach

by Michael W. Parrott

Today's complex world and tomorrow's unpredictable future implores governments to develop agile, adaptive, and resilient strategic security strategies, doctrine, organizations, and personnel capable of responding to multifaceted threats. Complex problems, often referred to as "wicked problems" are unpredictable and can never fully be understood.¹ The breadth, scope, and interconnectedness of a wicked problem to other problems exacerbate the ability to apply reductionist solutions designed for complicated quandary. As transregional and transnational threat networks (T3N) continue to grow in power and stature across the globe, the threat to the U.S. Homeland increases. T3N activities in the Western Hemisphere, are non-linear complex problems, which span the spectrum from peace to war. The military, interagency, and bureaucratic communities must learn to appreciate the context and complexities involving T3N; to effectively mitigate risks to the homeland. In an effort to counter-T3N, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations' (HSI) conducts "Operation Citadel;" a multi-year, interagency surge effort to bolster law enforcement, customs, and immigration enforcement capabilities of partnering nations, that also supports HSI international and domestic investigations. This essay argues that Citadel serves as an exemplary and innovative approach that counters T3N and associated activities within the Western Hemisphere. Citadel capitalizes on collaborative networks, information sharing, training, and targeted enforcement efforts by joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational (JIIM) partners.

Background

Operation Citadel, is an HSI led, JIIM collaborative surge initiative focused on identifying, disrupting, and dismantling T3N, associated enablers, and the pathways associated with movement of illicit commodities and resources throughout the globe.² The operation's emphasis is concentrated against terrorists, transnational criminal organizations (TCO), drug trafficking organizations (DTO),

Chief Warrant Officer Three Michael W. Parrott serves as a U.S. Army Counterintelligence Technician. He holds a Masters in Strategic Security Studies from National Defense University and a BA in Homeland Security with a concentration in Terrorism Studies from American Military University. His assignments include a myriad of tactical to strategic level assignments within the Special Operations, Counter Weapons of Mass Destruction, and Intelligence communities.

and their respective support networks that directly threaten the U.S. homeland. Citadel is a proven and effective counter-T3N initiative as evidenced by its multi-faceted approach which includes: networking, information sharing, training, and targeted enforcement activities. The operation truly embodies a defense-in-depth approach, enabling proactive partner nation and interagency led operations, actions, and/or investments (OAI) geared towards achieving judicial end-states against T3N.

In 2011, the executive branch took an important step in fighting transnational crime when enacted its Strategy to Combat Transnational Organized Crime (TOC Strategy).³ This strategy complements the current National Security Strategy as well as other national strategies and plans as they relate to the trafficking of persons, money laundering, and other transnational crimes that affect the U.S. By focusing on the international criminal network rather than individual crimes, the TOC Strategy builds, balances, and integrates the tools of American power to combat TCOs and related threats to national security with collaboration from international partners.

In 2014, DHS enacted the Southern Borders and Approaches Campaign Plan to remediate the vulnerabilities at America's borders and address an "unprecedented spike in illegal migration into South Texas" which was echoed by both the Southern Borders and Approaches Campaign Plan and the 2016 DHS *National Preparedness Report* (NPR).⁴ On 20 November 2014, in furtherance of the Department-wide Southern Borders and Approaches Campaign Plan, former Secretary Johnson commissioned three pilot Joint Task Forces (JTFs): East (JTF-E), West (JTF-W), and Investigations (JTF-I) as a means to enhance the Department's unity of effort in securing the nation's southern border and approaches.⁵ The three JTFs are responsible for establishing operational priorities and synchronizing capabilities in order to achieve SBAC objectives.

JTFs East and West are geographically focused task forces that concentrate on the southern land and maritime borders of the U.S. and the approaches to our border—including all of Central and South America and the Caribbean. JTF-I, a functional task force, was established to improve the investigative functions within the Department in furtherance of the Southern Borders and Approaches Campaign Plan by supporting priority criminal investigations initiated by HSI offices domestically and abroad. As a result of this effort, "JTF-I created and implemented Homeland Criminal Organization Target (HOMECORT)—the DHS-wide process for identifying and prioritizing the top criminal networks affecting homeland security."⁶ Since its inception over twenty separate HOMECORT networks have been targeted which has generated over a thousand criminal investigations.⁷

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Subsequently, ICE/HSI implemented the Illicit Pathways Attack Strategy (IPAS) in response to the Executive Branch's TOC Strategy, the Administration's goals, and DHS's Southern Borders and Approaches Campaign Plan. The IPAS was developed by ICE to leverage their expansive authorities, resources, and partnerships to disrupt and dismantle TOC as far away from U.S. borders as possible; a combination of the current (defense-in-depth) and former (defense forward) approaches to protecting the homeland. The strategy focuses on high risk human smuggling and illicit financial transactions.⁸ The "IPAS is built around core principles, including: 1) Working with counterparts to investigate, identify, disrupt, and dismantle TOC prior to their

illicit activities reaching the U.S. borders, 2) Prioritizing networks and pathways posing the greatest threats, 3) Maintaining robust interagency engagement, and 4) Coordinating a regional approach that leverages foreign partners.”⁹ HSI, in support of the Southern Borders and Approaches Campaign Plan, IPAS, and Department’s objectives, coordinates the dozens of investigations and operations targeting each HOMECORT case. The ultimate goal of a HOMECORT investigation is the complete dismantlement of the criminal network that is the subject of the investigation.

In June 2013, HSI, under the auspices of the IPAS and in conjunction with international partners, Departments of Defense (DoD) and State (DoS), and DHS’s Customs and Border Protection (CBP) initiated the inaugural multi-agency/nation collaborative surge initiative titled “Operation Citadel.” The 2013–2015 Citadel executive summaries are:¹⁰

2013

Citadel-13 targeted both the conventional and non-conventional pathways exploited by TCOs, DTOs, and terrorist support networks to smuggle narcotics, people, weapons, and contraband through the Central American (CENTAM) corridor and in/out of the United States. Citadel-13 activities included the training and capacity building of the Transnational Criminal Investigative Units (TCIUs), the development of intelligence, and the providing of international investigative support to prioritized HSI long-term domestic criminal investigations.¹¹ Investigative activities incorporated: surveillance, checkpoint operations, judicial wires, undercover operations, and port operations that resulted in significant enhancements to HSI criminal investigations, as well as the disruption of TOCs operating in CENTAM.

2014

In September 2014, HSI re-instituted the multi-agency collaborative surge initiative dubbed Citadel-14. The operation focused on the continued investigative and analytical identification of the criminal proceeds gained by T3N that threaten the homeland, by using intelligence-driven criminal investigative work with international law enforcement partners in CENTAM and Caribbean regions. Citadel-14 saw HSI collaborate with TCIUs, CBP, and DoD to expand the discovery of criminal networks; to prioritize the targeting of criminals associated with domestic and international HSI investigations; the development of investigative intelligence generated by partner nation TCIUs; the exploitation of criminal intelligence obtained from domestic and international port seizures and checkpoint operations; and the support of law enforcement operations resulting in the apprehension of key TCO leaders who were identified and indicted based on previous year’s efforts. Additionally HSI conducted partner nation training and capacity building in the Dominican Republic, Panama, and Guatemala.

2015

In 2015, Citadel-15 saw HSI, CBP, and the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) deploy special agents, analysts, and officers to Colombia, Panama, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador to conduct partner nation capacity building and training coupled with real-time intelligence, interdiction, and investigative operations at international seaports, airports, land borders, and other locations. These operational and intelligence efforts successfully supported ongoing domestic (HSI) investigations – including JTF-I, Extra-territorial Criminal Travel (ECT), and the Department of Justice (DoJ) Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) cases – that

dismantled large-scale TCOs and resulted in unprecedented coordination in conducting regional operations among partner nations and with HSI. This coordination extended to Panamanian prosecution efforts as well. These efforts also were critical to developing the intelligence picture of transnational criminal activity in the overall region. HSI Mexico and Mexican law enforcement authorities also participated in the operation. In total, Citadel-15 resulted in 210 criminal arrests, the rescue of 51 unaccompanied minors, seizure of \$2,078,988 from illicit currency movements, 2,133 biometric enrollments, and the initiation of 68 further criminal investigations. Crucial to the success of this ninety-day investigative operation was the interagency support provided by CBP, DEA, DoJ, DoD, DoS, U.S. Coast Guard (USCG), and the TCIUs of HSI's international partners.

2016 and Beyond

Similar to previous years, HSI, in conjunction with JIIM partners conducted Citadel 2016 and 2017 respectively. Citadel-16 net a significant increase in rescued unaccompanied minors, captured illicit goods, detentions, deportations, investigations, and overall disruption of illicit activities as compared to previous years. This can be attributed to two things: renewed energy from DoD in support of the operation, and a subsequent extension from 90 to 179 days in the execution phase. Citadel-16 also illuminated the complexity of the illicit human smuggling pathways, actors, and associated networks, and the limitations of U.S. and Partner Nation policies, laws, and enforcement.

Illegal migration and the subset Special Interest Aliens can be categorized as a wicked problem due to the breadth, interconnectedness, scope, complexity, and lack of discernible solutions. U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) in an effort to aid DHS and its components understand the complexities of

this problem hosted a Special Interest Aliens Senior Leader Seminar to highlight, share, and address the study's findings with interagency and inter-governmental partners. The intended outcomes of the Senior Leader Seminar included identification of the lead federal agency for the Special Interest Aliens problem-set, define terms of reference and common framework, and propose U.S. policy changes. Vignettes were used to educate U.S. government leaders and policymakers on the current threat and vulnerabilities within the nation's defenses. The Senior Leader Seminar's six conclusions spurred the development of a bi-annual Theater Special Operations Command/Geographic Combatant Command sponsored JIIM Western Hemisphere forum, operational approach framework, and Community of Action's six initiatives.¹² The Western Hemisphere forum's six initiatives nest with DHS's Special Interest

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Aliens Joint Action Group's three strategic goals, five capacity building effort categories, and the USSOCOM host Special Interest Aliens Senior Leader Seminar's six conclusions; in addition to Citadel's enforcement efforts. Furthermore, a collaborative whitepaper was published by HSI, Joint Terrorism Task Force Miami, and Special Operations Command South (SOCSOUTH) that highlighted how Special Interest Aliens exploited U.S. immigration, refugee, and asylum laws.¹³ The National Counter Terrorism Center reacted immediately, enacting implementation of national security

database checks for all Special Immigrant Visa applications with the authorization to block the processing of application(s) containing derogatory information.¹⁴

In 2017, Citadel-17 continued targeting the mechanisms used to move humans, illicit funds and contraband around the globe, with enforcement activities performed in Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, Colombia, Brazil, and the Dominican Republic. Participating agencies' collaborative efforts achieved significant successes in Latin America and the Caribbean through programs

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that bolstered the law enforcement, customs, and immigration enforcement capabilities of international partners. The scope of the operation incorporated training and capacity building through real-time cross-border operations with partner nation HSI Transnational Criminal Investigative Units. Citadel-17's ninety-day enforcement efforts netted quantitative and qualitative successes against aforementioned threat networks and activities.¹⁵ Citadel-17's specific results included: 714 foreign officers trained, eight unaccompanied minors rescued, seizures of \$250,232 from illicit currency movements, 2,005 biometric enrollments, the initiation of 33 criminal investigations, 219 criminal arrests, nine convictions, and publication of 135 Intelligence Information Reports.¹⁶ Of note, Citadel-17's efforts doubled the number of foreign officers trained, in comparison to Citadel-16. Additionally, participating U.S. government organizations provided vital resources to enhance foreign partner's investigative capabilities to counter-T3N. HSI was able to expand its domestic and

international investigations well beyond U.S. borders, which increased targeting effectiveness efforts directed at disrupting illicit actors, networks, and pathways. Subsequently, in June 2017, the National Intelligence Management Council directed DHS, DEA, and FBI lead the creation of a joint Intelligence Community (IC) and Law Enforcement report focused on TCOs and their subsidiaries' penetration into the U.S. per a tasking by the National Security Council (NSC).¹⁷ The report highlights opportunities for networking and information sharing across the U.S. government concerning TCO threats to national security.

Networking and Information Sharing

Citadel capitalizes upon collaborative forums, targeted conferences, and strong working relationships with domestic and foreign agencies. U.S. government leaders continue to recognize the power of informal networks and build "team of teams" constructs to increase collaboration amongst JIIM partners, in order to tackle complex problems and unstable environments.¹⁸ HSI routinely leverages their liaison officers within DoD's combatant commands to network and secure vital resource support necessary for the successful execution of Citadel.

From 2016 through the present, a resurgent effort by USSOUTHCOM in concert with USNORTHCOM, USSOCOM, and respective Component Commands saw significant wherewithal provided to Citadel in conjunction with interagency partners; a truly whole of government approach to counter-T3N. USSOCOM leveraged its expansive Special Operations Support Team (SOST) network to rally additional capital for Citadel amongst U.S. government partners.¹⁹ SOSTs are members of USSOCOM's Interagency Partnership Program (IAPP). According to its mission statement, "the IAPP advances TSOC [Theater Special Operations Command] and

other USSOCOM Component priorities with the interagency and other National Capital Region (NCR) based partners, through a robust SOST network, in order to achieve CDRUSSOCOM objectives.”²⁰ Similarly, Admiral Kurt W. Tidd reinforced his commitment to this effort by incorporating Citadel into the USSOUTHCOM 2017-2027 Theater Strategy. He emphasized the paramount need for Joint Forces to “understand the security environment, cultivate friendly networks of allies and partners, and undertake all activities as part of a comprehensively joint effort spanning” across JIIM elements.²¹ Citadel was highlighted in USSOUTHCOM’s latest theater strategy as a way to achieve effects by strengthening and supporting JIIM networks.²² USSOUTHCOM also instituted organizational change, creating the Network Engagement Team to enable interoperability to more effectively operationalize the Joint Force in support of interagency/partner nation judicial end-states. Further inertia occurred when National Geographic aired an eight-part series on 19 January 2018. The series “Chain of Command” featured USSOUTHCOM and SOCSOUTH’s mission within Latin America to counter violent extremism and Citadel’s efforts to “curb human smuggling and other transnational criminal activities in Central and South America.”²³

SOCSOUTH’s involvement in Citadel over the past five years epitomizes the steadfast commitment to be the mutually supportive and interoperable partner of choice in the region. In 2013, contributions in support of Citadel-13 incorporated the deployment of Special Operations Force’s intelligence and operations integrators, analysis, information sharing, training for HSI’s partnered forces, and biometrics support. This level, quality, and depth of support ensured interoperability, facilitated mutual trust and confidence amongst participating interagency partners. This contributed to significant impacts to T3N and illicit activities within Central America and

the U.S. homeland. During 2014-2015 the command’s support to Citadel was limited due resource limitations.

In 2016, SOCSOUTH spearheaded support to Citadel to improve on previous years’ involvement, the command spearheaded DoD’s renewed support to Citadel; appointing an operations and intelligence integrator to lead the TSOC’s efforts. SOCSOUTH’s operations and intelligence integrator networked across the Special Operations Force enterprise, garnered resources, support, and enabled information-intelligence sharing amongst partaking U.S. government partners. The integrator’s efforts netted multi-Combatant Command, TSOC, Component, and task forces’ involvement in Citadel’s counter-T3N OAI. These efforts paved the way for multiple DoD elements to contribute and support future Citadel iterations.

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Training

HSI bolstered host nation law enforcement, customs, and immigration enforcement capabilities prior/during Citadel iterations via a variety of training venues. To gain the requisite resources and support, HSI - International Operations’ Assistant Director Raymond Villanueva testified before a House of Representative’s Committee on Homeland Security that, “Partnering with TCIUs (Transnational Criminal Investigative Units) enables ICE to promote direct action via information sharing and investigative leads while respecting the sovereignty of the host country and cultivating international partnerships.”²⁴ Transnational Criminal Investigative Units are

comprised of foreign law enforcement officials, customs officers, immigration officers, and prosecutors who receive ICE training and undergo a strict vetting process to ensure that shared information and operational activities are not compromised. Aligned with the President's Strategy in Combating Transnational Organized Crime, Transnational Criminal Investigative Units identify targets, collect evidence, share intelligence, and facilitate the prosecution of TCOs both in-country and in the U.S. These efforts, which often occur thousands of miles from the U.S. borders, essentially act as an outer layer of security for the U.S. The Transnational Criminal Investigative Unit program is a stellar example of how HSI and participating partner nation vetted forces' successful combined multi-national efforts to identify, disrupt, and dismantle T3N throughout the Western Hemisphere has improved regional security.

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The HSI initiative BITMAP (Biometric Identification Transnational Migration Alert Program) enabled host nation, "law enforcement officers [to] collect and share biometric and biographic data on [over 2,005] special interest individuals [in 2017] to identify potential threat actors in or transiting through participating countries."²⁵ The BITMAP program enables partner-country law enforcement officers the opportunity and capability to collect and share biometric and biographic data on special interest individuals in order to identify potential threat actors in or transiting through participating countries.²⁶ Information gathered via BITMAP is shared across all identity intelligence databases used by the U.S. government and Allies in order to enable U.S. law enforcement and IC actions;

while simultaneously enabling DHS to share information back with host nation officials concerning enrolled individuals.²⁷ Identity intelligence actions increased collaboration amongst interagency/DoD partners, directly contributed positive effects against global human smuggling networks which move Special Interest Aliens, and support counterterrorism OAI in the Western Hemisphere and in overseas conflict zones. "Through this process, ICE/HSI is able to track movement towards the U.S., take joint action with partner nations along the route, and deter human smuggling through South and Central America and Caribbean."²⁸ BITMAP was identified in the 2016 DHS Appropriations Bill as a critical effort to collect biometric data concerning, "Special Interest Aliens, violent criminals, fugitives, and confirmed or suspected terrorists encountered within illicit pathways."²⁹ In 2018, the BITMAP program was permanently established by House Resolution 6439 "to address and reduce national security, border security, and terrorist threats before such threats reach the international border of the United States."³⁰ The program uses portable biometric collection devices to obtain forensic-quality fingerprints, latent fingerprints, iris images, photos, and other biometric data. Currently BITMAP is deployed in fourteen separate countries, with two additional countries planned in the near-term.³¹ Biometric collection in addition to other identity intelligence activities deny adversaries anonymity; allowing intelligence and security agencies to positively identify individuals and deny them entry into the homeland further away from U.S. borders.

Similarly, U.S. Special Operations Forces/DoD leverages Title 10 U.S.C. 284 authorities to support various U.S. government and/or partner nation law enforcement agencies' counterdrug and counter-TOC activities. Additionally, in accordance with Title 10 U.S. Code Sub-Section 333, DoD elements train and equip partner nation security forces for

the purposes of building capacity to conduct specified operations.³² USC 333 authorizes the Secretary of Defense, “to conduct or support a program or programs to provide training and equipment to the national security forces of one or more foreign countries for the purpose of building the capacity of such forces to conduct.”³³ The range of operations authorized under this authority include: counterterrorism, counter-weapons of mass destruction, counter-DTO, counter-TOC, maritime and border security, military intelligence, and “operations or activities that contribute to an international coalition operation that is determined by the Secretary to be in the national interest of the U.S.”³⁴ A recent example of Title 10 support was the March 2018, USSOUTHCOM Forensic Exploitation and Analysis Center and Biometric Subject Matter Expert Exchange with Honduran Law Enforcement, orchestrated by DHS/HSI. The Biometric Subject Matter Expert Exchange enabled DoD subject matter experts the opportunity to share best practices concerning the collection and processing of biometric and forensic evidence with Honduran law enforcement officials, that will aid in future cases and prosecutions of criminals and terrorists.

Targeted Enforcement

Citadel exemplifies a unified approach to surge against an identified threat and bring U.S. government, Allies, and host nation capabilities to bear in an efficient manner. Prior to Citadel’s develop, circa 2008, a Somali citizen Ahmed Muhammed Dhakane was detained in Texas and later sentenced for his ties to multiple African based terrorist groups, including al-Shabaab. He assisted facilitating other known-or-suspected terrorists to enter the U.S. illegally and was subsequently imprisoned for ten years beginning in 2011.³⁵ According to DHS’s website, “a ‘known terrorist’ is an individual who has been (a) arrested, charged by information,

indicted for, or convicted of a crime related to terrorism and/or terrorist activities by U.S. Government or foreign government authorities; or (b) identified as a terrorist or a member of a terrorist organization pursuant to statute, Executive Order, or international legal obligation pursuant to a United Nations Security Council Resolution.”³⁶ Whereas, “a ‘suspected terrorist’ is an individual who is reasonably suspected to be engaging in, has engaged in, or intends to engage in conduct constituting, in preparation for, in aid of, or related to terrorism and/or terrorist activities.”³⁷ Cases such as Dhakane and others led ICE to develop the IPAS strategy in 2011 and OAI’s to counter the influx of known-or-suspected terrorists via the southern border and approaches.

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In 2016, Citadel enabled the necessary surge personnel required for a mutually supportive ICE Operation titled “OPERATION MESOAMERICA”.³⁸ According to ICE Director Sarah R. Saldaña the operation is a reflection of multilateral commitment to identifying and dismantling criminal networks involved in the illicit movement of people... and demonstrates the commitment the international community has to operate as one in a united front against those involved in human smuggling.³⁹ MESOAMERICA was a 15-month multinational investigation that resulted in forty-one individuals linked to TCOs responsible for smuggling hundreds of individuals through South and Central America into the U.S. were arrested by foreign partners as part of Citadel.⁴⁰

Similarly, in March 2017, Costa Rican authorities detained and subsequently deported

a Somali citizen named Ibrahim Qoordheen, with alleged international terrorism ties shortly after entering the country from Panama; after leveraging ICE agents' assistance.⁴¹ During a House Oversight Committee briefing CBP officials testified to reports regarding an unspecified number of Islamist terrorist organization members were apprehended crossing America's southern border.⁴² As the crisis on the southern border continues, the risk to the Homeland persists.

Conclusion

Citadel embodies a unified JIIM approach to identify, disrupt, and dismantle T3Ns in the Western Hemisphere which are vital to U.S. security interests and protection of the homeland. The multi-faceted methodology Citadel leverages a focused surge of U.S. government resources dedicated towards counter-T3N. Annual reevaluations in the form of after action reviews increased efficiency and effectiveness of future Citadel iterations. Despite after action reviews improvements, there is still a vital need for consistent operational planning and fiscal resources to be dedicated, budgeted, and forecasted to enable continued successes in counter-T3N and associated activities. Citadel's incorporation of the Transnational Criminal Investigative Unit program is phenomenal. In an effort to be more mutually supportive and interoperable, recommend ICE/HSI capitalize on DoD and U.S. Special Operations Forces' global presence and authorities (U.S.C. 284 and 333) to enable persistent engagement, professional development, and sustainment training beyond the Transnational Criminal Investigative Unit's initial certification training. DoD elements have renewed support to Citadel and JIIM efforts to counter-T3N and enabling interagency/partner nation judicial end states; evident by the enormous successes BITMAP and identity intelligence activities continue to produce, while denying anonymity to T3N actors. Citadel will continue to be a driving force for change within the hemisphere. Failed implementation of mutually supportive and interoperable JIIM OAs like Citadel, enable our adversaries to threaten national security, remain anonymous, and exploit illicit pathways and vulnerabilities within the southern approaches to the U.S. Homeland, and threaten national security. **IAJ**

Notes

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- 23 NATGEO, “Shoulder to Shoulder,” episode 3 of “Chain of Command” Season 1, January 22, 2019, accessed April 3, 2019, <<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/tv/watch/ab25a819eb0987bce9301cfdb2b32d06>>. “Chain of Command” is an eight-part series narrated by Chris Evans that offers unprecedented access to the U.S. military’s mission to combat violent extremism in hot spots like Iraq, Afghanistan, and West Africa as well as Latin America. The series also features HSI’s “Operation Citadel” and its partnership with USSOUTHCOM to curb human smuggling and other transnational criminal activities in Central and South America. The episode “Shoulder to Shoulder” highlights HSI’s efforts to combat transnational criminal organizations and their activities before they reach the United States.

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