

UPR Info - Pre-session WG Statement - CJ Sandley

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Escalating Authoritarianism in the United States: Disregarding International Law, Dismantling of Civil Society, and Undermining Fundamental Rights

I am C.J. Sandley, Senior Staff Attorney with the Center for Constitutional Rights, speaking on behalf of a civil society coalition concerned with the U.S.'s expansion of its counterterrorism framework and undermining of the international legal order.

My client, Edicson Quintero, is one such individual ensnared in a counterterrorism framework that has upended or destroyed millions of lives. On March 15, 2025, Edicson was among the 238 Venezuelans rendered to El Salvador's notorious CECOT prison. The U.S. falsely labeled Edicson a member of the gang Tren de Aragua, recently designated as a terrorist organization. At CECOT, Edicson was unable to contact his loved ones or attorneys. He endured beatings; he spent every day in a cell with about 20 other men. On one occasion, the men made flags with pillowcases, writing with their own blood the words, "Queremos libertad," or "we want freedom," and "Sácame de aquí," "get me out of here."

(slide) We have seen this before: Guantánamo, extraordinary rendition and torture, round-ups of immigrants, suspicionless surveillance. 2026 marks 25 years since the beginning of the so-called Global War on Terror. The lack of accountability for the human rights crises in those years has created a culture of government impunity and paved the way for current targeting of migrants as "national security threats," maligning Palestine solidarity as "terrorism," and labeling queer and trans communities as "gender identity extremists."

(slide) The politics of "counterterrorism" is a central tool of authoritarianism: undermining international law and accountability bodies, dangerous corporate-state alignment, and the systematic targeting of dissent.

(Undermining Int'l Law and Accountability Bodies) (slide) Since officially withdrawing from the Human Rights Council and Universal Periodic Review process last year, the U.S. has accelerated its retreat from the international legal order. Since September 2, 2025, the U.S. has murdered 221 people in boatstrikes in the Caribbean in the name of counter "narcoterrorism."

In Venezuela, the U.S. conducted military bombardments and abducted a head of state – a "grave" violation of the UN Charter. In Iran, the U.S. has violated the ban on aggressive force and coercive intervention. And in the name of mass deportation – nearly half a million deported in a single year, with about 65,000 currently detained – the U.S. has flouted international norms

including the Convention Against Torture, subjecting numerous migrants to refoulement or chain refoulement.

(slide) While member states should reaffirm previous recommendations that the U.S. ratify all core human rights instruments, we urge you to escalate demands that the U.S.:

- Cease all use of force inconsistent with the UN Charter.
- Investigate all alleged unlawful killings and abuses carried out under so-called counterterrorism authorities.
- And restore funding and participate fully in UN systems.

(Corporate-State Alignment) (slide) To further its goals of suppressing dissent and maximizing deportations, the U.S. government has partnered with tech corporations to deploy mobile phone geolocation tracking, automated license plate readers, and biometrics collection. At times, enforcement decisions are made solely based on AI inferences from this data. These tools have been deployed abroad as well. In Iran, U.S. forces used advanced systems, including Anthropic's Claude model and Palantir-linked tools, to accelerate the "kill chain." This contributed to the bombing of a girls' school in Minab that killed more than 170 civilians, mostly children.

(slide) We recommend the U.S. government:

- End ideology-based surveillance; and
- And disclose the full details of all commercial surveillance technology procurements, to achieve greater transparency and accountability.

(Systematic Targeting of Dissent) (slide) While several member states have previously recommended increased freedom of speech protections in the U.S., President Trump's second term has been marked by the relentless targeting of dissent. From CCR's client, Mahmoud Khalil's detention and deportation proceedings based on his advocacy for a free Palestine, to the outrageous convictions of protestors at the Prairieland immigration detention center, and the criminal prosecution of the Southern Poverty Law Center, a bulwark of civil rights and anti-hate work in the U.S. South, these attacks are part of a systematic strategy. The Trump administration and aligned private actors are intent on targeting those opposed to their political agenda. Since April, the Trump administration unveiled its new Counterterrorism Strategy, which called for the "neutralization of violent secular political groups whose ideology is anti-American, radically pro-transgender, and anarchist." Last month, the administration announced a new international campaign against "far-left terrorism," a label designed to apply to anyone the government wishes to target. And a new State Department report names 43 Americans as "agents of Cuban influence."

(slide) We recommend that member states call on the U.S. to:

- Refrain from using counterterrorism and national security frameworks to target civil society and those advocating for Palestine.
- And rescind executive policies and directives that expand the scope of “domestic terrorism.”

(slide) For a full set of recommendations, please see our April 2026 report. Thank you.