



# 2023 Quadrennial Homeland Security Review: Evolution of a Strategic Review

## Overview

In April 2023, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued its third *Quadrennial Homeland Security Review* (QHSR). DHS states that the QHSR is a “comprehensive examination of the homeland security strategy of the Nation, including recommendations regarding the long-term strategy and priorities of the Nation for homeland security.”

The QHSR report delivered to Congress provides an explanation of this process. Neither the review process nor the report to Congress is itself the strategy. Instead, the 2023 QHSR (both the process and the report) are part of the executive branch’s continuous reevaluation of the nation’s homeland security posture.

Broadly, the 2023 QHSR confirms national homeland security goals established in previous reports, but also adds a new goal related to combatting crimes of exploitation, such as human trafficking. This In Focus provides additional context for interpreting the 2023 QHSR, as well as relevant policy considerations.

## History of the QHSR

Congress originally tasked the National Homeland Security Council to assess homeland security objectives, commitments, and risks in Section 904 of the Homeland Security Act of 2002 (HSA; P.L. 107-296). Additionally, the council was to oversee and review homeland security policies.

With the enactment of the Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007 (9/11 Act; P.L. 110-53), Congress required DHS to conduct a quadrennial homeland security review. Congress required both the QHSR review and report to include

- prioritized missions;
- a description of the interagency cooperation, preparedness of federal response assets, infrastructure, budget plan, and other homeland security elements; and
- an assessment of DHS’s organizational structure with the national homeland security strategy.

Congress specifically required the DHS Secretary to consult with other federal entities, and required the review process to include

- a delineated and updated national homeland security strategy; and
- a review and assessment of the effectiveness of DHS mechanisms for meeting the QHSR’s requirements, and

turning those requirements into an acquisition strategy and expenditure plan within the department.

Additionally, Congress required the QHSR report to

- summarize the results of the homeland security review process;
- describe national homeland security threats;
- discuss the status of cooperation among all levels of governments in preventing terrorist attacks and responding to emergencies; and
- explain any underlying assumptions used in conducting the review.

## Meeting QHSR Process and Report Requirements

Congress specifically tasked DHS with the QHSR process and established reporting requirements through Section 707 of the HSA (as amended). It appears that DHS met a significant number of the review and report requirements with the 2023 QHSR. DHS, however, only partially met the requirement to prioritize missions because the department only identified cross-cutting priorities rather than truly prioritizing missions. DHS also did not provide an assessment of DHS mechanisms for meeting the QHSR’s requirements, or for turning those requirements into an acquisition strategy and expenditure plan, as required by the HSA.

DHS delivered QHSR reports as expected in 2010 and 2014. In 2010, the Obama Administration combined the national and homeland security strategies with its 2010 issuance of the *National Security Strategy*. DHS did not issue a statutorily required QHSR in 2018.

## 2023 Homeland Security Missions and Priorities

In the 2023 QHSR, DHS states that the five homeland security missions identified in the 2010 and 2014 editions are still pertinent:

- securing against the evolving terrorism threat;
- safeguarding and securing cyberspace;
- countering biological threats and hazards;
- securing and managing flows of people and goods; and
- strengthening the execution of DHS’s mission through public-private partnerships.

The 2023 QHSR added a sixth national homeland security mission: to “combat crimes of exploitation and protect victims.” DHS states that this mission reflects a need to

stop perpetrators of human trafficking, curtail labor and child exploitation, support victims, and engage the public. The 2023 QHSR also provides an in-depth framework of the nation's basic homeland security missions.

The 2010 and 2014 QHSR reports were widely criticized for not communicating the nation's homeland security priorities, not comparing favorably to the Department of Defense's *Quadrennial Defense Review*, and not identifying a budget plan or resources to secure the nation. The 2023 QHSR appears not to address these shortcomings. Instead, the 2023 QHSR provides an overview summary of DHS's responsibilities, activities, and accomplishments.

## Discussion of Potential 2023 QHSR Issues

Since the 2023 QHSR is the first to be published in nearly a decade, Congress may want to review a number of potential issues raised by the new report, including:

- the continued absence of prioritized national homeland security missions;
- the continued absence of forward-looking analysis of current homeland security threats and issues; and
- the continued absence of an acquisition, budget, or fiscal plan to support national homeland security missions.

Congress may also wish to address the core issue of requiring a single department (DHS) to review the entire nation's homeland security efforts. Homeland security is commonly understood to require a whole-of-government approach; however, the current QHSR process has focused on departmental responsibilities rather than enterprise-wide endeavors. The congressional requirement of interagency review has yet to be achieved by any of the current or past QHSRs.

The Trump Administration did not release a QHSR between 2017 to 2021. The Atlantic Council, a nonpartisan organization that promotes U.S. leadership and engagement in international affairs, argues that the nation's homeland

security effort during this period was directly led by the White House rather than DHS, and focused primarily on immigration and terrorism. The Biden Administration has since returned to the previously observed practice of reviewing the nation's homeland security quadrennially. Congress may want to consider whether the quadrennial schedule is adequate, and how best to assure the QHSR is delivered according to statutory reporting requirements.

Lastly, the 2023 QHSR attempts to show how the nation's homeland security threat has evolved since 2014, and (as identified above) identifies a new mission: combatting crimes of exploitation and protecting victims. Members of Congress may want to consider whether this mission aligns with national homeland security goals and how best to support or conduct oversight on it.

## Conclusion

Holistically, the 2023 QHSR is only a review of national homeland security activities since 2014. The current QHSR looks at challenges and responsibilities, but does not address fiscal or budget priorities.

Some critics have argued the homeland security missions identified in the QHSR may not actually be the correct focus for DHS, or for the nation more broadly. For example, some argue that immigration is not a homeland security issue so much as it is a cultural, economic, and geopolitical one. Some also question whether disaster response is truly a homeland security function.

Finally, Congress may want to revisit its legislative provision addressing DHS and the QHSR, and the requirements it placed on DHS for reviewing the nation's homeland security.

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