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Statement for the Record

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Subcommittee on Terrorism, Non-Proliferation, and Trade

Regarding

**Foreign Fighter Threats to the Homeland in the Context of the Islamic State of
Iraq and the Levant**

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Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Sherman, Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) efforts to protect our nation from the threats posed by terrorists operating out of Syria and Iraq. Many of these terrorists are affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In particular, I will address how DHS helps to protect the U.S. Homeland from violent extremists we call “foreign fighters” who are not from Syria or Iraq but who travel there to participate in the conflict and who may then seek to attack the United States, or U.S. persons or interests, or our allies.

While this hearing focuses on the terrorist threat from Syria and Iraq, core al-Qa’ida, al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and their affiliates and adherents in other parts of the world are a major concern for DHS. Despite senior leadership deaths, these groups maintain the intent and, in some cases, the capability to conduct attacks against U.S. citizens and our facilities. AQAP and other terrorist groups have shown they can adjust their tactics, techniques and procedures to target the West in a number of ways.

ISIL is one of the terrorist groups operating out of Syria and Iraq. ISIL operates in some ways as a military organization, is attempting to govern territory, and has capabilities most terrorist groups do not possess. The group aspires to overthrow governments in the region and eventually beyond.

At present, DHS is unaware of any specific, credible threat to the U.S. Homeland from ISIL. However, violent extremists who support terrorist groups based in Syria have demonstrated the intent and capability to target American citizens overseas. ISIL constitutes an active and serious threat within the region and could attempt attacks on U.S. targets overseas with little-to-no warning. Attacks by ISIL and its predecessor, al-Qa’ida in Iraq on U.S. personnel from 2004 to 2011 in Iraq are well-known and well- documented. ISIL has also encouraged its supporters to carry out attacks elsewhere. Such attacks could be conducted by ISIL supporters acting without specific direction from ISIL leadership with little-to-no warning. Even before the events of August and September in Syria ISIL’s leader publicly threatened “direct confrontation” with the United States in January 2014. DHS is increasingly concerned that ISIL-inspired individuals may choose to carry out attacks in the homeland rather than attempt to travel overseas.

ISIL has an extensive propaganda capability, disseminating media content on multiple online platforms, including social media, to enhance its appeal. ISIL’s English-language messaging and its online supporters have employed Twitter campaigns that have been able to reach a wide audience and encourage acts of violence. ISIL messaging in particular is slanted in the hopes of encouraging sympathetic people, including some in the United States, to travel to Syria to fight with them. We are aware of a number of U.S. persons who have attempted travel to Syria this

year to engage in fighting there. More than 100 U.S. persons and over 2,700 Westerners have traveled or attempted travel to Syria to participate in the conflict.

We are concerned about the threat of foreign fighters from the United States or elsewhere who might go to Syria, become even more radicalized, and then return to their home countries, including the United States, where they might try to conduct attacks either on their own or in concert with others. Some foreign fighters turn away from violence, but others, some of whom have Western passports, may become further radicalized to violence while receiving additional training and experience, and pose a potential threat upon their return to their home countries or other countries to which they may travel.

DHS is concerned that terrorist groups operating in permissive environments in conflict zones like northern Syria and western Iraq can pose a security threat to the United States and our allies. The terrorists operating in Syria and Iraq have shown a demonstrated intent to attack targets outside of Syria and Iraq and inspire others to carry out attacks in their homelands.

DHS notes, in particular, that aviation is a continuing focus of terrorist attention. Terrorist groups have shown a continued interest in developing ways to defeat aviation security, and in carrying out, or attempting to carry out, attacks on U.S.-bound civil aviation aircraft. Concealed Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) remain the threat of primary concern. Terrorists in the past three years have expressed interest in concealing IEDs in modified commercial electronics including laptops, cell phones, printers, and cameras. Terrorists have also expressed interest in concealing IEDs in physical areas of the body they perceive as not thoroughly searched, or areas we cannot search, such as in the body. Terrorists can also use shoes and other articles of clothing with hollow spaces to conceal explosives. Terrorists remain interested in concealing explosives in cosmetics and liquids in order to defeat airport security screening.

DHS Efforts to Counter ISIL and Foreign Fighters

Let me turn to the specific security measures that have been put in place in response to the terrorist threat that has emerged from Syria and Iraq. DHS has enhanced our already robust security measures, taken some actions directly, and instituted others in collaboration with our interagency partners, state and local authorities, the private sector, and our foreign allies.

Aviation Security: First, to address the threats from terrorist groups overseas, DHS has in recent months enhanced aviation security. Much of the terrorist threat continues to center around aviation security. In early July, Secretary Johnson directed the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) to enhance screening at select overseas airports with direct flights to the United States. Since then, TSA has mandated enhanced screening to occur at additional overseas airports. The United Kingdom and other countries have followed with similar enhancements to their aviation security. DHS continually evaluates the implementation of these measures with the

air carriers and foreign airports and whether more is necessary, without unnecessarily burdening the traveling public.

Preclearance: Second, over the longer term, one of Secretary Johnson's initiatives is to increase the use of "preclearance" at overseas airports with flights to the United States. Preclearance is an important step to protect the security of U.S.-bound civil aviation. Preclearance means that before the plane takes off, all passengers and their baggage are inspected by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers, using their full legal authorities and using enhanced aviation security approved by TSA. We have long had preclearance in airports in Canada and the Caribbean, and in recent years, we have expanded it to Ireland and the United Arab Emirates. DHS is working with the aviation industry, airport authorities, and other governments to expand the number of U.S.-bound flights covered by the additional security benefits that preclearance is able to bring.

Tracking Foreign Fighters: Third, DHS, along with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), and the U.S. Intelligence Community, is making greater efforts to track foreign fighters who fought in Syria who come from the United States or who seek to enter the United States from another country. More than 16,000 foreign fighters have traveled to Syria over the last three years, including approximately 2,700 Westerners. The FBI has arrested a number of individuals who have tried to travel from the United States to Syria to support terrorist activities there. We are concerned that not only may foreign fighters join ISIL or other violent extremist groups in Syria, they may also be recruited by these violent extremist groups to leave Syria and conduct external attacks.

Encouraging Other Governments to Collect Information on Foreign Fighters: Fourth, we are working with European and other governments to build better information sharing to track foreign fighters who traveled to or from Syria. Whenever DHS officials engage with European counterparts, this topic is almost always item number one on the agenda. The importance of this issue is also reflected by the United Nations Security Council's adoption of Resolution 2178 in September, in a summit chaired by President Obama that addressed the threat of foreign terrorist fighters. This resolution has provided new impetus for European and other governments to use technology like Advanced Passenger Information (API) that DHS has long used to detect known and previously unknown terrorists and terrorist facilitators. We need to ensure that we are doing all we can to identify those who, by their travel patterns, attempt to hide their association with terrorist groups. DHS is encouraging our counterparts in other countries at risk for terrorist attacks to join with us in using information like Advance Passenger Information and Passenger Name Record data to help identify both known and previously unknown terrorists and terrorist facilitators.

Enhancing ESTA and the VWP: Fifth, DHS is already increasing efforts to track those who enter and leave Syria and may later seek to travel to the United States without a State Department-issued visa under the Visa Waiver Program (VWP). Working with the Intelligence

Community, DHS is aware that a number of foreign fighters in Syria have come from various VWP countries.

In response, this fall, DHS strengthened the security of the VWP through enhancements to the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA). Those changes went into effect on November 3, 2014. ESTA adds a significant layer of security to the VWP by enabling CBP to conduct security vetting of prospective VWP travelers to determine if they pose a law enforcement or security risk before they board aircraft destined for the United States. DHS determined that additional data will improve the Department's ability to screen prospective VWP travelers and more accurately and effectively identify those who pose a security risk to the United States. These improvements provide an additional layer of enduring security for the VWP and facilitate visa-free travel to the United States.

Helping to Identify Homegrown Violent Extremists Through Community Engagement:

Sixth, DHS is continually working to help Federal, state, and local law enforcement to identify Homegrown Violent Extremists (HVEs). Secretary Johnson regularly speaks of the challenge that the independent actor or "lone wolf" poses to security agencies. A Homegrown Violent Extremist is a person who did not train at an overseas terrorist camp, or join the ranks of a terrorist organization overseas, but who is inspired here at home by violent extremist social media, literature, or ideology. In many respects, this is the hardest terrorist threat to detect, and one of concern to DHS.

To address the domestic "lone offender" threat, while also working to counter the life cycle of a violent extremist, Secretary Johnson directed DHS to build on our partnerships with local communities, as well as with state and local law enforcement, in a way that enhances community relationships. First responders, more than the Federal government, have the ability to work with the community to detect potential threats before they manifest themselves violently. Within DHS, we have outreach programs with communities who themselves are engaging youth in violence prevention. Secretary Johnson directed that we step up these programs and he has personally participated in them by meeting with community groups in Chicago, Columbus, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles. These gatherings have focused on community concerns and served to build trust and partnership to counter violent extremism (CVE).

The department has recently increased its CVE efforts under the direction of a department-wide CVE Coordinator. DHS's Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL) and NCTC developed and implemented the Community Awareness Briefing (CAB), designed to share unclassified information with communities regarding the threat of violent extremism. It is designed to help communities and law enforcement develop the necessary understanding of violent extremism recruitment tactics and explore ways to collectively and holistically address these threats before they become a challenge at the local level. Also in partnership with NCTC, DHS uses a foreign fighter scenario in Community Resiliency Exercises to demonstrate to communities and law enforcement officials how they can help disengage a person from the

pathway to violent extremism. Additionally, DHS collaborates with partner countries (such as the United Kingdom, Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, Canada, Spain, and France) to develop best practices in community engagement endeavors that effectively counter violent extremism.

To address the home-grown violent extremist, we must also emphasize the need for help from the public. “If You See Something, Say Something™” is more than a slogan. For example, in September, we sent a private sector advisory identifying for retail businesses a long list of materials that could be used as explosive precursors and the types of suspicious behavior that a retailer should look for from someone who buys a lot of these materials. In light of ISIL’s exhortations to attack uniformed service members, and the tragic events in Canada, Secretary Johnson also ordered a reinforced Federal Protective Service presence in several cities.

Information Sharing: Seventh, the DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis (I&A) is working closely with interagency partners to evaluate threat data and ensure relevant information reaches DHS personnel and state, local, tribal, and territorial partners who can use this information to reduce risks to the U.S. Homeland. To ensure our state, local, tribal, territorial and private sector partners are kept informed of the current ISIL threat, I&A has hosted calls with our partners in recent months to examine the ongoing situation and, jointly with the FBI, released Joint Intelligence Bulletins that provided context and background, and examined the potential retaliatory threat and ISIL’s use of social media.

In addition, within the U.S. Government, DHS and our interagency partners in law enforcement and the Intelligence Community are continually enhancing our ability to share information with each other about suspicious individuals.

Conclusion

Since 9/11, DHS and our partners in the law enforcement and Intelligence Communities have vastly improved the Nation’s ability to detect and disrupt terrorist plots overseas before they reach the U.S. Homeland. We ask for the support of this Subcommittee as we continue to adapt to emerging threats and improve our ability to keep our Nation safe.

Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Sherman, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to testify. I look forward to answering your questions.