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Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the potential threats to the U.S. emanating out of Syria. Obviously, the situation inside Syria is grim, with a despicable tyrant on one side and a rebellion compromised by al Qaeda and like-minded extremists on the other. In between these two poles are the people who originally rose up against tyranny in search of a better life. As we've seen time and again in this long war, Muslims embroiled in violence in faraway lands are often the first line of defense against an ideology and an organization that pose a direct threat to the West. There are many Syrian families who deserve the free world's support today, beyond the prospect of limited airstrikes.

We should have no illusions about the nature of the Syrian war. What we are witnessing right now is a conflict that will have ramifications for our security in the West. The fighting in Syria and the terrorist campaign in Iraq are deeply linked, feeding off of one another in a way that increases the violence in both countries and potentially throughout the region. American interests outside of Syria have already been threatened by the war. We saw this late last year when al Qaeda repurposed a cell of Jordanian citizens who had fought in Syria for an attack inside their home country. They reportedly had the U.S. Embassy in their crosshairs and were planning a complex assault that involved other targets as well.

In my testimony today, I focus on the threat posed by al Qaeda and allied groups inside Syria, recognizing that al Qaeda did not start the Syrian rebellion. Moreover, there are many groups fighting on the side of the rebellion, making any clear-eyed analysis difficult. However, we can distill a number of observations.

- **Al Qaeda and its extremist allies have grown much stronger since late 2011.** Al Qaeda does not control the entire rebellion, which is made up of a complex set of actors and alliances. However, al Qaeda and its allies dominate a large portion of northern Syria and play a key role in the fighting throughout the rest of the country. These same al Qaeda-affiliated forces have fought alongside Free Syrian Army brigades. There is no clear geographic dividing line between the most extreme fighters and other rebels. For example, al Qaeda's affiliates played a key role in the fighting in Latakia, an Assad stronghold on the coast, in early August. And within the past week we saw al Qaeda-affiliated fighters lead an attack in Malula, a Christian village not far from Damascus. These are just two examples chosen from many.
- **Al Qaeda has made the fight for Syria a strategic priority.** Ayman al Zawahiri, al Qaeda's emir, has repeatedly called on jihadists to concentrate their efforts on the fight against the Assad regime. But al Qaeda desires much more than Assad's defeat. Al Qaeda wants to control territory and rule over others. This is consistent with al Qaeda's desire to establish an Islamic Emirate in the heart of the Levant. In his book, *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*, Zawahiri discussed at length the importance of creating such a state.

Al Qaeda and associated groups have consistently pursued this goal in jihadist hotspots around the globe and this is especially true in Syria today.

- **Two known al Qaeda affiliates operate inside Syria: Jabhat al Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham (or Levant).** The leaders of both groups have sworn an oath of loyalty (*bayat*) to Ayman al Zawahiri and al Qaeda's senior leadership. The heads of these two affiliates openly bickered over the chain-of-command in early April 2013. This forced Zawahiri to intervene, but the head of the ISIS initially rejected Zawahiri's decision to have the two remain independently-operated franchises. It appears that some sort of compromise has been brokered, however, as the two al Qaeda affiliates fight alongside one another against their common enemies, including Kurdish forces in the north.
- **Al Qaeda is not just a terrorist organization. Al Qaeda's leaders are political revolutionaries seeking to acquire power for themselves and their ideology in several countries. They have a plan for Syria.** Al Qaeda's affiliates inside Syria are not just fighting Assad's forces, or committing various other acts of terror. They are seeking to inculcate their ideology within the Syrian population. Many Syrians have no love for al Qaeda's ideology, or its harsh brand of sharia law. But al Qaeda knows this and has adjusted its tactics accordingly. Jabhat al Nusra and the ISIS are providing local governance in the areas they control, and are seeking to win hearts and minds by making various social services available to the population. This is a continuation of a trend that we've seen elsewhere, beginning in Yemen, where al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula launched Ansar al Sharia as its political face. Ansar al Sharia does more than fight al Qaeda's enemies. It has provided food, electricity, medical care, and various other necessities to Yemenis. Al Qaeda's affiliates in Syria have copied this strategy in Syria, and are increasing their popular support in some areas (especially in the north and east) in this manner. This model is being implemented in Raqqah, Aleppo, Deir al Zor.
- **Syria has become the central front in the global jihad. Other al Qaeda-linked groups have joined the fight in Syria, thereby strengthening al Qaeda's hand.** Groups including the Pakistani Taliban (Tekrik-e Taliban) and the Muhajireen (Migrants) Brigade are fighting in Syria. The first group sent fighters and trainers from South Asia to Syria, while the second is comprised of Chechens and other foreign fighters. Indeed, several thousand foreign fighters from around the globe have joined the fight. Countries throughout North Africa and the Middle East have supplied a large number of jihadist recruits. In addition, a significant number of Europeans have traveled to Syria for jihad.
- **Some of the more powerful Syrian rebel groups are closely allied with al Qaeda's affiliates.** Ahrar al Sham and its coalition of like-minded groups, the Syrian Islamic Front

(SIF), fight alongside al Qaeda's fighters regularly. Brigades belonging to another Islamist coalition, the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front (SILF), have coordinated their operations with al Qaeda's affiliates and Ahrar al Sham in key battles as well. For example, fighters from Nusra, the SIF, and the SILF overran the Taftanaz Airbase in January. The collective strength of these groups is easily in the tens of thousands of fighters nationwide.

- **As the 9/11 Commission recognized, there is a direct connection between terrorism “over there” and the terrorist threat to Americans “over here.”** Most of al Qaeda's assets are devoted to acquiring power in North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. However, some portion of their assets is always devoted to terrorist plots against the West. Before the 9/11 attacks, most al Qaeda recruits were trained to fight alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan or as part of insurgencies elsewhere. Only a small number of al Qaeda members were selected to take part in international operations. Since 9/11, al Qaeda has greatly expanded its overall footprint by directing or supporting various insurgencies. This increases al Qaeda's potential recruits, with a small percentage of them being repurposed for operations against the West. We have seen this in Yemen, for example, where al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula simultaneously increased its capacity to wage an insurgency against the government, while also increasing its ability to launch attacks on the U.S. homeland. Al Qaeda's Iraqi affiliate, which spawned the Al Nusra Front, has dedicated a small part of its resources to attacking the West as well. The Department of Homeland Security announced in 2004 that al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was ordered by Osama bin Laden to assemble a cell capable of attacking the U.S. In 2007, failed attacks in London and Glasgow were tied back to AQI. It should be noted that during this same time-period AQI was mainly focused on winning territory, not attacking the West.
- **Al Qaeda has talent inside Syria today, including top operatives who currently pose a threat to the West.** According to credible press reports, a top al Qaeda terrorist named Mustafa Setmariam Nasar (a.k.a. Abu Musab al Suri) was freed from prison in the wake of the rebellion. Nasar has been tied to al Qaeda's terrorist plotting inside Europe, including the networks that executed the 2004 Madrid train bombings and the 2005 attacks in London. Nasar played a prominent role in al Qaeda's operations prior to being detained in 2005 and transferred to Syrian custody. Nasar is a widely influential jihadist thinker and a key advocate of small-scale terrorist attacks inside the West. He was reportedly freed by the Assad regime in the wake of the current rebellion. One of Nasar's closest colleagues, known as Abu Khalid al Suri, was appointed by Zawahiri to a key position within the region. We should wonder what happened to Mohammed Zammar, an al Qaeda recruiter who helped convince the 9/11 Hamburg cell to travel to Afghanistan for training. Zammar was once imprisoned by the Assad regime and may very well be

free today. In addition to this “old school” talent, al Qaeda has been recruiting Westerners who could be used in attacks against their home countries or elsewhere in the West. In recent months, European officials have openly worried about this possibility.

- **Al Qaeda’s affiliates are seeking possession of chemical and biological weapons in Syria.** On May 30, the Turkish press reported that an al Nusra Front cell had been arrested and was found to be in possession of about two kilos of sarin gas. The following day, June 1, Iraqi officials announced that they had broken up an al Qaeda cell that was seeking to launch sarin nerve gas attacks in Iraq, Europe and possibly North America. If the Iraqi government’s claims are accurate, then we already have evidence that al Qaeda’s affiliates in Iraq and Syria intend to use chemical weapons in an attack the West. I encourage the Homeland Security Committee to investigate these claims and ascertain for itself the extent of al Qaeda’s efforts in this regard.