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Global Battleground: The Fight Against Islamic Extremism at Home and Abroad

Thank you chairman McCall and ranking member Thompson for the invitation to be here today. And let me also thank the entire committee for taking on this difficult, but very important topic.

We are truly engaged on a Global Battlefield fighting against those who would visit violence on the innocent for their own warped objectives.

There is much to be said about this battlefield and I am sure we will discuss the roots of the violent extremism which we now face.

And I know we cannot have an honest discussion of that without also discussing one of the worlds great monotheisms. So before I launch into that, let me say that I understand that Islam, Christianity and Judaism all trace their roots to the same deserts. That we are all people of the book. And that we are all children of Abraham.

But we cannot conduct a useful discussion of our current conflict without also talking about Islam. In my view, we are not talking about all of Islam and we certainly are not talking about all Muslims, but we risk confusing ourselves if we ignore the religious roots that some use to justify their violence.

In looking at the current conflict in the Levant, there are actually three wars going on simultaneously.

The first is an intra-Sunni battle, in one case pitting Isis against Al Qaeda. In another case, it is Sunni based violent extremists against the Sunni states in the region. Here we see Isis against Jordan. Isis against Egypt. Isis against Saudi Arabia. This is all Sunni on Sunni, with Sunni fundamentalists trying to construct an Islamic caliphate at the expense of traditional Muslim states.

The second conflict is Sunni-Shia, the continuation of a succession crisis following the death of the prophet that began in 632. Here we have the so-called Shia Crescent-- Iran, much of Iraq, the Alawites in Syria, and Hezbollah in Lebanon--against the Sunni monarchies and states like Egypt. The worst of the current violence we are seeing, like the horrific mosque bombings in Yemen, reflect this conflict. And I think we will see this conflict becoming more dominant and more violent as we go forward.

The third conflict is the challenge of reconciling Islam with what we in the West call modernity. I want to avoid cultural arrogance here, Mr. Chairman, since Christendom went through a similar crisis in the 17th century. And at the end of the 30 years war then, we in Europe broadly decided to separate the sacred from the secular in our

political cultures. I know that that is an oversimplification, but it is instructive. That outcome has led to a growth of religious tolerance that has characterized the best of Western life since. It remains to be seen whether or not another great monotheism, Islam, will follow this same arc or if religion there will remain the business of state or--in its extreme form--replace the state.

The common thread across these three conflicts is Islam. And indeed, Richard Haass, the chairman of the Council on foreign relations, has compared the current conflict in the Levant to Europe's Thirty Years War. I fear that he is correct and what we are seeing here will last a generation or more.

I know that much has been made about recent administration comments that what we really have here is a lack of opportunity and that these issues could be solved by more jobs and better economic development.

There is actually truth to that. When at CIA I was fond of saying that many jihadists join the movement for the same reasons that some young Americans join the Crips and the Bloods. There is much here about youthful alienation, the need to belong to something greater than self, the search for meaningful identity. But it also matters what gang you join. And this gang, at its senior levels, justifies its horrific violence through references to the holy Quran.

This is fundamentally a struggle over ideas, and unfortunately it is a struggle over which we, as largely a Judeo Christian nation, have only limited influence. We can try to set the conditions for success, by empowering and protecting moderate voices, for example. We also have to look to our own safety by resorting to force to kill or capture those already committed to doing us violence.

But over the long term, the only solution lies within Islam itself. Here, the recent speech by President Sisi of Egypt to the scholars at Azhar university, the seat of Sunni scholarship, is most encouraging. In essence, the president told the theologians that they have to get their act together and correct and discredit what he views to be gross misinterpretations of Islamic scripture by the jihadists.

Sisi also attended Mass and wished his Coptic fellow citizens Merry Christmas.

President Sisi is an observant, pious Muslim so his words and his actions should carry some weight and offer us some hope.

Mr. Chairman, there is a lot more to be said about this topic and I look forward to the committees questions.