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Statement for the Record for the Homeland Security Subcommittee on Border
and Maritime Security: An Examination of the Threat Posed by ISIL
Terrorists with Western Passports
311 Cannon Building, September 10, 10:00 a.m., TBD

Chairwoman Miller, Ranking Member Jackson Lee, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear today on behalf of the State Department with my colleagues from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). We are deeply supportive of DHS' efforts to protect the U.S. homeland and make every effort to amplify its work through diplomatic engagement and information sharing with our allies and partners.

We remain gravely concerned by the activities of terrorists in Syria and Iraq, including the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and al-Nusrah Front. ISIL is an extremely dangerous organization operating in a chaotic part of the world. It has exploited the conflict in Syria and sectarian tensions in Iraq to entrench itself in both countries, now spanning the geographic center of the Middle East. ISIL's attacks in Iraq and Syria have resulted in the deaths of thousands of people and the displacement of hundreds of thousands more from their ancestral homelands. ISIL has brutally targeted all groups who do not fit their narrow world view including some Sunnis, Shia, and religious and ethnic minority groups. In Syria, as in Iraq, ISIL has committed widespread atrocities, including torture, murder, the taking and execution of detainees, and hostages sexual violence, , and forcible displacement.

We have seen in Syria a trend of foreign fighter travel for the purposes of participating in the conflict – largely driven on an unprecedented scale by global connectivity that is available through the internet and social media . ISIL operates an extremely sophisticated propaganda machine and disseminates timely, high-quality media content on multiple platforms, including on social media. We have seen ISIL use a range of media to attempt to aggrandize its military capabilities, including showcasing the executions of captured soldiers, and evidence of consecutive battlefield victories resulting in territorial gains. More recently, the group's supporters have sustained this momentum on social media by encouraging attacks in the United States and against U.S. interests in retaliation for our airstrikes. ISIL has also used its propaganda campaign to draw foreign fighters to the group, including many from Western countries.

It is difficult to provide a precise figure of the total number of foreign fighters in Syria, though the best available estimates indicate that approximately 12,000 fighters from at least 50 countries – including over 100 U.S. persons – may have traveled to Syria to fight for ISIL or al-Nusrah Front since the beginning of the conflict. These fighters not only exacerbate regional instability, but create real threats to U.S. interests and our allies. We are working closely with countries affected by the foreign fighter problem set to counter the threat these fighters pose. As we have built a common picture of the threat with our allies, so, too, we continue our efforts to build consensus around joint initiatives and complementary approaches to sustain a broad and comprehensive approach.

Securing U.S. Borders

The Department of State works closely with the Department of Homeland Security to support its mission in protecting the United States by promoting effective aviation and border security screening with our foreign partners through enhanced information sharing. For example, an important effort in our counterterrorism work is Homeland Security Presidential Directive Six (HSPD-6), a post-9/11 White House initiative. Through HSPD-6, the State Department works with the Terrorist Screening Center to negotiate the exchange of identities of known or suspected terrorists with foreign partners to enhance our mutual border screening efforts.

The Terrorist Screening Center implements these agreements with foreign partners. These agreements allow partners to namecheck incoming flights to their countries, which helps us deter terrorist travel, creating an extra layer of security for the United States.

HSPD-6 agreements or arrangements are a pre-requisite to participate in the Visa Waiver Program (VWP). To date, we have forty-three such agreements in place which includes VWP partners, and we continue to actively seek out new partners.

The Department of State also works closely with its partners at the Department of Homeland Security to strengthen global aviation security by engaging foreign partners in bolstering aviation screening at last point of departure (LPD) airports with direct flights to the United States to identify and prevent known or suspected terrorists from boarding commercial flights.

Foreign Terrorist Fighters

Additionally, the Department of State is leading interagency efforts to engage with foreign partners to prevent in the first place and, where possible, to interdict foreign extremist travel to Syria. We strongly believe that a whole-of-government approach is the only way to truly address the threat, and we work closely with our interagency colleagues to facilitate comprehensive approaches. This work includes facilitating information exchanges with foreign partners, building partner capacity, and developing shared objectives focused on addressing the foreign fighter threat. Ambassador Robert Bradtke, Senior Advisor for Partner Engagement on Syria Foreign Fighters, leads this work for the State Department and has met with officials from European Union member countries, North Africa, the Gulf, the Balkans, and East Asia and Pacific, to discuss and examine our shared serious concerns about the foreign terrorist fighter threat. Ambassador Bradtke and other Department counterparts have led sustained efforts to urge reform and build capacity for whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches to counter this threat, notably encouraging information sharing and border security, legal reform and criminal justice, and countering violent extremism.

Important progress has been made, but more work remains. Countries in the Balkans recently have adopted or are considering more comprehensive counterterrorism laws. In the Gulf, countries such as Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have increased penalties related to terrorist financing and several have established the necessary architecture to enforce their counterterrorism laws more effectively, such as Kuwait's newly created Financial Intelligence Unit and Qatar's establishment of a charity abuse review board.

Some of our partners have implemented legal reforms aimed more directly at countering foreign terrorist fighters. For example, traveling overseas to participate in combat has been newly criminalized in the Balkans, Canada, and Jordan. The United Kingdom and Indonesia have banned participation in groups such as ISIL, while Malaysia has publicly opposed ISIL and its activities.

Countries have taken a variety of steps under existing laws and regulations to inhibit foreign fighter's resources or travel. Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and eight European countries have the authority to revoke the passports of suspected foreign fighters.

The European Council recently called for the accelerated implementation of EU measures in support of Member States to combat foreign fighters, including

finalizing an EU Passenger Name Record (PNR) proposal by the end of this year, and increasing cooperation with partner nations such as the United States to strengthen border and aviation security in the region.

In all our efforts with our partners, we stress the importance of – and facilitate implementation of – adhering to a rule of law framework. We are encouraged by these and other reforms to counter the foreign fighter threat. While we have seen progress, our efforts must be sustained and intensified. We will continue to work closely with partners, particularly those in the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe in the coming months to enhance cooperation and build on efforts to date.

Multilateral Initiatives and the Global Counterterrorism Forum

We are also working the foreign terrorist fighter issue actively on the multilateral front. The week of September 24, President Obama will chair a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Summit on the rising threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters, no matter their religious ideology or country of origin. This rare UNSC leader-level session is the first U.S.-hosted Head of Government-level UNSC session since President Obama led a UNSC Summit on non-proliferation in September 2009, and it presents a unique opportunity to demonstrate the breadth of international consensus regarding the foreign terrorist fighter threat and to build momentum for policy initiatives on this topic at home and abroad. In addition to a briefing from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon and brief remarks from leaders of all 15 UNSC members, this summit is expected to adopt a U.S.-drafted UNSC Resolution during the session.

That same week, Secretary Kerry and Turkish Foreign Minister Cavusoglu (*chah-voosh-OH-loo*) will co-chair a Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) ministerial meeting, where GCTF members will adopt the first-ever set of global good practices to address the foreign terrorist fighter threat (FTF) and launch a working group dedicated to working with GCTF members and non-members alike to mobilize resources and expertise to advance their implementation. The good practices cover the four central aspects of the phenomenon: (1) radicalizing to violent extremism; (2) recruitment and facilitation; (3) travel and fighting; and, (4) return and reintegration. They are also intended to shape bilateral or multilateral technical or other capacity-building assistance that is provided in this area. This effort will allow our practitioners and other experts to continue to share expertise and broaden skills in addressing the FTF challenge.

Conclusion

We remain deeply supportive of DHS' efforts to protect the U.S. homeland and make every effort to support its work through diplomatic engagement.

The State Department is involved in an array of activities to counter terrorism and the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters, such as capacity building, countering terrorist finance, and countering violent extremism, my State Department colleagues would be happy to brief Congress about these lines of effort at another time.

Our terrorist adversaries are nimble, and given the vitally important imperative to protect the United States and to stay "one step ahead," we should ensure that the tools of civilian power continue to adapt to serve national security. As I hope you will agree, we have focused and sharpened our efforts, but there remains much to do.

I look forward to answering your questions and working closely with you in making the United States safer, in conjunction with our friends and allies across the globe.