

# Congressional Testimony

## **“Islamist Foreign Fighters Returning Home and the Threat to Europe”**

Thomas Joscelyn  
Senior Fellow, Foundation for Defense of Democracies  
Senior Editor, The Long War Journal

**Hearing before House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging  
Threats**

Washington, DC  
September 19, 2014



1726 M Street NW • Suite 700 • Washington, DC 20036

Chairman Rohrabacher, Ranking Member Keating and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the threat posed by Islamist foreign fighters returning home to Europe. We have been asked to answer the question, “How are European countries addressing the threat, and how can the US assist in those efforts to thwart future terrorist attacks?” I offer my thoughts in more detail below.

But I begin by recalling the 9/11 Commission’s warning with respect to failed states. “In the twentieth century,” the Commission’s final report reads, “strategists focused on the world’s great industrial heartlands.” In the twenty-first century, however, “the focus is in the opposite direction, toward remote regions and failing states.” A few sentences later, the Commission continues:

If, for example, Iraq becomes a failed state, it will go to the top of the list of places that are breeding grounds for attacks against Americans at home. Similarly, if we are paying insufficient attention to Afghanistan, the rule of the Taliban or warlords or narcotraffickers may reemerge and its countryside could once again offer refuge to al Qaeda, or its successor.<sup>1</sup>

Those words were written more than a decade ago. Unfortunately, they still ring true today, not just for the US, but also for Europe. Except, we no longer have to worry about just Iraq becoming a failed state. We now have to contend with a failed state in Syria as well. And Syria is not “remote.” It is much easier for foreign fighters to travel to Syria today than it was for new jihadists to get to Afghanistan in the 1980s. This is one reason that there are likely more foreign fighters in Syria than there were in Afghanistan at the height of the jihad against the Soviets. Estimates vary, but the total number of foreign recruits in Syria easily tops 10,000. A CIA source recently told CNN “that more than 15,000 foreign fighters, including 2,000 Westerners, have gone to Syria.” They “come from more than 80 countries.”<sup>2</sup>

This, of course, is an unprecedented security challenge and one that counterterrorism and intelligence officials will be dealing with for some time to come. It requires exceptional international cooperation to track the threats to Europe and elsewhere emerging out of Iraq and Syria. My thoughts below are focused on what I consider to be some of the key aspects of dealing with this threat.

At the moment, most people are understandably focused on the Islamic State (often called the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL, or ISIS). There is certainly a strong possibility that some foreign fighters will return from fighting in the Islamic State’s ranks to commit an act of terror at home, either on their own accord or under the direction of senior terrorists.

However, I also want to focus our attention today on one of the other significant threat streams coming out of Syria. Al-Qaeda’s official branch in the country, Jabhat al-Nusrah, has experienced al-Qaeda veterans in its ranks. I think they pose more of a near-term threat when it

---

<sup>1</sup> US National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, “The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States,” July 22, 2004, page 367.

<sup>2</sup> Jomana Karadsheh, Jim Sciutto & Laura Smith-Spark, “How Foreign Fighters Are Swelling ISIS Ranks in Startling Numbers,” *CNN*, September 14, 2014. (<http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/12/world/meast/isis-numbers/>)

comes to launching catastrophic attacks in the West than do their Islamic State counterparts. And even though al-Nusrah and the Islamic State have been at odds, we should not rule out the possibility that parts of each organization could come together against their common enemies in the West. Indeed, two of al-Qaeda's leading branches are currently encouraging the jihadists in Syria to broker a truce, such that they focus their efforts against the US and its allies.<sup>3</sup> There is also a large incentive for terrorists in both organizations to separately lash out at the West, portraying any such attacks as an act of retaliation for the American-led bombings.

In my opinion, the key issues that officials in Europe and the US will continue to address include the following:

- **Throughout much of the war in Syria, Turkey has had an open door policy for jihadist and non-jihadist fighters alike.**<sup>4</sup>

Turkey is not only a crucial transit point for jihadists entering Syria, it is also a common facilitation point for those returning to their home countries. European and American officials must continue to explore ways to put pressure on Turkey to disrupt the flow of foreign fighters and also convince the government to share as much intelligence as possible. Counterterrorism officials are most interested in intelligence identifying the fighters, recruiters, travel facilitators, financiers, arms distributors, and others.

- **Turkey's policy of distinguishing between the Islamic State and other extremists, including Jabhat al-Nusrah, an official branch of al-Qaeda, has been a failure.**

While Turkey has been willing to work against the Islamic State, it has been far more accommodating when it comes to al-Nusrah and other extremist organizations. There have been occasional reports that the Turkish government has moved against al-Nusrah or other jihadists affiliated with the group. But this is not a consistent policy. Recently, the former American ambassador to Ankara, Francis Riccardione, told reporters that Turkey has been working with al-Nusrah. "We ultimately had no choice but to agree to disagree," Riccardione said. "The Turks frankly worked with groups for a period, including al Nusra[h], who we finally designated as we're not willing to work with."<sup>5</sup> Turkey opposed the US government's decision to designate al-Nusrah as a terrorist organization in late 2012.<sup>6</sup> And *The Wall Street Journal*, citing "officials involved in the internal discussions" surrounding the designation, even reported that the move was intended "to send a message to Ankara about the need to

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda Branches Urge Jihadist Unity against US," *The Long War Journal*, September 16, 2014. ([http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/09/al\\_qaeda\\_branches\\_ur.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/09/al_qaeda_branches_ur.php))

<sup>4</sup> For a summary of reports on Turkey's role in facilitating the flow of jihadists into Syria, see: Jonathan Schanzer, "Terrorism Finance in Turkey: A Growing Concern," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, February 2014, pages 8-10.

([http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/Schanzer\\_Turkey\\_Final\\_Report\\_3\\_smaller.pdf](http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/Schanzer_Turkey_Final_Report_3_smaller.pdf))

<sup>5</sup> Richard Spencer & Raf Sanchez, "Turkish Government Co-operated with al-Qaeda in Syria, Says Former US Ambassador," *The Telegraph* (UK), September 12, 2014.

(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/turkey/11093478/Turkish-government-co-operated-with-al-Qaeda-in-Syria-says-former-US-ambassador.html>)

<sup>6</sup> US Department of State, Press Statement, "Terrorist Designations of the al-Nusrah Front as an Alias for al-Qa'ida in Iraq," December 11, 2012. (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/12/201759.htm>)

more tightly control the arms flow.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the US Treasury Department has recognized Turkey as a key link between al-Qaeda’s Iran-based network, Gulf donors, and operatives in Syria. In October 2012, Treasury reported that al-Qaeda’s Iran-based network is “working to move fighters and money through Turkey to support al-Qa’ida-affiliated elements in Syria” and the head of that network at the time was also “leveraging his extensive network of Kuwaiti jihadist donors to send money to Syria via Turkey.”<sup>8</sup>

Turkey, therefore, is a key chokepoint for disrupting al-Qaeda’s international terrorist network, including any terrorist plots aimed at the West.

- **Inside Syria today, al-Qaeda operatives in Jabhat al-Nusrah are already attempting to identify new recruits capable of striking the West.**

US officials have warned of these efforts. “In Syria, veteran al Qaeda fighters have traveled from Pakistan to take advantage of the permissive operating environment and access to foreign fighters,” the director of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), Matthew Olsen, said during a speech earlier this month. Olsen added, “They are focused on plotting against the West.”<sup>9</sup> The *Associated Press* recently reported that a cell of al-Qaeda operatives known as the “Khorasan group” has been sent to Syria “by Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri to recruit Europeans and Americans whose passports allow them to board a US-bound airliner with less scrutiny from security officials.”<sup>10</sup> Al-Qaeda operatives inside Syria are working with bomb makers from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), a branch of al-Qaeda that has proven to be particularly adept at placing explosives on board airliners. Al-Qaeda has English-speaking recruiters inside Syria who are capable of indoctrinating new recruits.<sup>11</sup> And some senior al-Qaeda operatives dispatched from Pakistan to Syria openly pine for attacks against the US homeland and American interests elsewhere on their widely-read Twitter accounts.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, there is a clear and present danger that al-Qaeda will be able to successfully recruit new cells dedicated to attacking the West. Even if they assemble such cells, al-Qaeda will still have to get around the West’s significant counterterrorism defenses. Still, the potential threat looms.

- **Most of the foreign fighters who travel from Europe to Syria will not become threats to**

<sup>7</sup> Adam Entous & Joe Parkinson, “Turkey’s Spymaster Plots Own Course on Syria,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 10, 2013. (<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303643304579107373585228330>)

<sup>8</sup> US Department of the Treasury, Press Release, “Treasury Further Exposes Iran-Based Al-Qa’ida Network,” October 18, 2012. (<http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1741.aspx>)

<sup>9</sup> Matthew G. Olsen, “Remarks as Prepared,” *The Brookings Institution*, September 3, 2014.

(<http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/2014-09-03%20Remarks%20for%20the%20Brookings%20Institution.pdf>)

<sup>10</sup> Ken Dilanian & Eileen Sullivan, “Al Qaeda Group Could Be a Threat to US Aviation,” *Associated Press*, September 14, 2014. (<http://www.bostonglobe.com/news/world/2014/09/13/qaeda-cell-syria-could-pose-threat-aviation/GnqIdES9Ar4DZjTfbZyGXl/story.html>)

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, “Al Qaeda Official in Syria Eas Extremist Preacher in Australia,” *The Long War Journal*, March 21, 2014. ([http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/03/former\\_islamic\\_preac.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/03/former_islamic_preac.php))

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, “Treasury Designates 2 ‘Key’ al Qaeda Financiers,” *The Long War Journal*, August 22, 2014. ([http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/08/treasury\\_designates\\_3.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/08/treasury_designates_3.php))

**their native or adopted home countries in the West. However, as the total number of foreign fighters increases, so does the probability that *some* of them will be repurposed for mass casualty attacks. Identifying the most “talented” and dedicated jihadist recruits should be a top priority.**

Most of the foreign fighters who travel abroad will stay invested in the fight in Iraq and Syria. Others will become disillusioned and return home, realizing that the jihad is not as glamorous as it was made out to be. But as the number of foreign fighters increases, so does the talent pool available to professional terrorists interested in planning devastating terrorist attacks in the West.

Consider pre-9/11 Afghanistan. The overwhelming majority of al-Qaeda’s recruits did not travel to Afghanistan to learn how to attack inside Europe or the US. Most of them fought inside Afghanistan, or were trained to fight in insurgencies elsewhere around the world. The 9/11 Commission found that between 10,000 and 20,000 recruits were trained in al-Qaeda-sponsored training camps between 1996 and September 11, 2001.<sup>13</sup> Only “a small percentage” of those recruits “went on to receive advanced terrorist training.”<sup>14</sup> Of course, that “small percentage” of new jihadists included the suicide hijack pilots responsible for the 9/11 attacks. Al-Qaeda’s leaders recognized that, among all their recruits, the terrorists in the Hamburg cell possessed the right combination of aptitude, Westernized habits, and travel documents to carry out a 9/11-style attack.

Disillusioned foreign fighters can be a good source of intelligence concerning which jihadists are the most capable and committed. European officials likely use something akin to an informant network within the jihadists’ ranks already. Such efforts help determine, albeit imperfectly, the difference between jihadi tourists and the true believers. American and European officials must share any such intelligence.

Past experience has shown that jihadists recruited in Europe can be used in attacks on the US, and American jihadists can be used in plots against European countries. A noteworthy example of the latter is the story of David Headley’s career. Headley, an American, performed surveillance for the 2008 Mumbai attacks. Al-Qaeda also considered using him in a plot against the Danish newspaper that published controversial cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed.

- **The Islamic State may or may not currently have the operational capability to launch mass casualty attacks in the West. But counterterrorism officials should constantly reassess their assumptions regarding the organization’s reach.**

Counterterrorism officials say they have no intelligence indicating that the Islamic State is currently planning attacks inside the US. Indeed, the group *may* not currently have the capability to carry out a large-scale attack in the West. However, the past offers us some reasons for concern.

---

<sup>13</sup> The 9/11 Commission Report, page 67.

<sup>14</sup> US National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, “Overview of the Enemy,” Staff Statement No. 15, page 10. ([http://www.9-11commission.gov/staff\\_statements/staff\\_statement\\_15.pdf](http://www.9-11commission.gov/staff_statements/staff_statement_15.pdf))

We've learned that jihadist groups can quickly evolve from a national or regional insurgency into a threat against the US homeland. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was re-established in early 2009. On Christmas Day that year, a would-be suicide bomber nearly destroyed a Detroit-bound plane. Prior to that attack, AQAP wasn't considered a threat to the US homeland, as counterterrorism officials believed the group only posed a threat to US interests inside Yemen.<sup>15</sup> The same can be said for the Pakistani Taliban, which trained a man to plant a car bomb in the middle of Times Square. Both attempts luckily failed.

While not all jihadist organizations will target the US, some of them will. And they can quickly become a direct threat to the US homeland. We should keep in mind that the presence of highly-skilled bomb makers within AQAP was not known until after their bombs were deployed. It also wasn't known that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the architect of 9/11, was an al-Qaeda operative until several months after his minions carried out their deeds in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania.

None of this is to suggest that we know the Islamic State is capable 9/11-style attacks today. The group is embroiled in a multi-sided fight in both Iraq and Syria, and this uses up much of its resources. But the lessons of the past are clear: The threat posed by the Islamic State can evolve quickly, and there is likely much we currently do not know. As NCTC director Matthew Olsen recent remarked, while counterterrorism officials have "no credible information that [the Islamic State] is planning to attack the" US, the group "has the potential to use its safe haven to plan and coordinate attacks in Europe and the US."<sup>16</sup>

- **The Islamic State's leaders have directly threatened the US, and we should take their threats seriously, even if we are not sure about their capabilities.**

In his very first recorded speech, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the head of the Islamic State, threatened the US. Addressing American officials directly in an audio recording released on July 21, 2012, Baghdadi said: "As for your security, your citizens cannot travel to any country without being afraid. The mujahideen have launched after your armies, and have sworn to make you taste something harder than what Usama had made you taste. You will see them in your home, Allah permitting. Our war with you has only begun, so wait."<sup>17</sup> In January of this year, Baghdadi promised the US that it would soon be in a "direct confrontation." Baghdadi again addressed America directly, saying, "So as to let you know, you the protector of the cross, that the war of agency will not enrich you in Syria as it did not enrich you in Iraq, and very soon you will be in the direct confrontation - you will be forced to do so, Allah permitting. The sons of the Islam have settled their selves for this day."<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, "The System Failed," *The Weekly Standard*, May 19, 2010.

(<http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/system-failed>)

<sup>16</sup> Matthew G. Olsen, "Remarks as Prepared," *The Brookings Institution*, September 3, 2014.

(<http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/2014-09-03%20Remarks%20for%20the%20Brookings%20Institution.pdf>)

<sup>17</sup> "ISI Leader Champions Mission, Calls for Support in First Audio Speech," *SITE Intelligence Group*, July 21, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> "ISIL Leader Addresses Factional Conflict in Syria, Challenges U.S.," *SITE Intelligence Group*, January 19, 2014.

The beheadings of two American reporters and one British citizen in recent weeks have highlighted just how aggressively anti-Western the Islamic State is. In each of the three gruesome videos, the Islamic State's executioner makes it clear that group is opposed to the US-led bombing campaign. The Islamic State almost certainly had the desire to strike in US and Europe even prior to the bombings, but with the West becoming involved in the fight, the group may now make attacks abroad more of a priority.

- **There are clear warning signs that the Islamic State and its sympathizers already threaten Europe. The Islamic State has a worldwide network of supporters, with known operatives throughout Europe.**

The jihadist thought to be responsible for the May 24, 2014 shooting at the Jewish Museum of Belgium spent months in Syria.<sup>19</sup> Four people were killed in his attack. One of the hostages held by the Islamic State has identified Mehdi Nemmouche, the alleged shooter, as being responsible for torturing the group's prisoners in Syria.<sup>20</sup> Even if the Islamic State's leadership did not order Nemmouche to carry out an attack at the Jewish Museum, or on any other target, the shooting demonstrates the ability of a known jihadist to carry out a small-scale assault after returning from Syria. French counterterrorism officials had already deemed Nemmouche to be a risk, reportedly placing him under surveillance after he returned from Syria in 2013.<sup>21</sup> This should be considered a disturbing precedent, as Nemmouche was not an unknown at the time of his attack.

My colleague at *The Long War Journal*, Lisa Lundquist, has provided an excellent overview of the efforts made by counterterrorism officials in Europe and elsewhere to track and disrupt the Islamic State's international network.<sup>22</sup> The Islamic State currently has the capacity to carry out smaller-scale attacks in Europe, if its operatives can evade counterterrorism defenses.

- **The Islamic State's predecessor organizations first posed a threat to Europe more than a decade ago. While the organization has evolved significantly since then, current counterterrorism efforts should be seen as a continuation of the past, recognizing that some of the same recruiting and facilitation networks have likely been involved the whole time.**

Even before the Iraq War began in March 2003, the CIA was hunting suspected terrorists in Europe who were tied to al-Qaeda's operations in northern Iraq. The suspected terrorists worked in conjunction with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the founder of al-Qaeda in Iraq, which eventually evolved into the Islamic State. Former CIA director George Tenet writes in his

<sup>19</sup> Anne Penketh, "French Suspect in Brussels Jewish Museum Attack Spent Year in Syria," *The Guardian* (U.K.), June 1, 2014. (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/01/french-suspect-brussels-jewish-museum-attack-syria>)

<sup>20</sup> Kevin Rawlinson, "Jewish Museum Shooting Suspect 'Is Islamic State Torturer'," *The Guardian* (U.K.), September 6, 2014. (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/06/jewish-museum-shooting-suspect-islamic-state-torturer-brussels-syria>)

<sup>21</sup> Anne Penketh, "Brussels Jewish Museum Shooting: Suspect with Islamist Links Arrested," *The Guardian* (U.K.), June 1, 2014. (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/01/suspect-arrest-brussels-jewish-museum-shooting>)

<sup>22</sup> Lisa Lundquist, "The Islamic State's Global Reach," *The Long War Journal's Threat Matrix*, September 5, 2014. ([http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2014/09/the\\_islamic\\_state\\_and\\_the\\_sham.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2014/09/the_islamic_state_and_the_sham.php))

autobiography that US officials' "efforts to track activities emanating from Kurmal [in northern Iraq] resulted in the arrest of nearly one hundred Zarqawi operatives in Western Europe planning to use poisons in operations."<sup>23</sup> Tenet notes that in the summer of 2000 al-Qaeda worked with Kurdish Islamists, including Ansar al-Islam, "to create a safe haven for al-Qaeda in an area of northeastern Iraq not under Iraqi government control, in the event Afghanistan was lost as a sanctuary."<sup>24</sup> The area became a "hub for al Qaeda operations" and "up to two hundred al Qaeda fighters began to relocate there in camps after the Afghan campaign began in the fall of 2001."<sup>25</sup> Tenet also writes that two longtime subordinates to Ayman al-Zawahiri, Thirwat Shihata and Yussef Dardiri, were among the "dozen al Qaeda-affiliated extremists" who "converged on Baghdad, with apparently no harassment on the part of the Iraqi government" in 2002.<sup>26</sup> The CIA had "[c]redible information" that Shihata "was willing to strike US, Israeli, and Egyptian targets sometime in the future."<sup>27</sup> Dardiri, also known as Abu Ayyub al-Masri, went on to become one of the first leaders of the Islamic State of Iraq, which became the current Islamic State. Dardiri was killed in April 2010. Shihata was arrested in Egypt earlier this year.

The threats continued in the years that followed. 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 US. In 2007, failed attacks in London and Glasgow were tied back to AQI.

In sum, while for many the threat posed by the Islamic State appears to be a new phenomenon, it is actually the continuation of a story that dates back to late 2001.

---

<sup>23</sup> George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), page 351.

<sup>24</sup> Tenet, page 350.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Tenet, page 351.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*