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Subcommittee on Terrorism, Non-Proliferation and Trade
U.S. Counterterrorism Efforts in Syria: A Winning Strategy?
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Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Keating, Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

I want to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the important issue of counterterrorism strategy and Syria. Today, the phrase that comes to mind – and that has been used by many, many analysts – is that Syria now is “the problem from hell.” Today, with upwards of a quarter of a million dead, more than four million Syrians now in exile – causing a crisis in Europe and for Syria’s neighbors – and almost eight million internally displaced, and extremist groups such as ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra deeply dug in, one can only say that Syria has descended to a lower and darker circle of hell.

From an American perspective, one of the most worrisome aspects of the situation in Syria is the persistence of the safe haven that has been created there and in Iraq for jihadist terrorists. This safe haven, together with the experience of irregular warfare that members of ISIL, al-Nusra and others are receiving, along with the continuing influx of aspiring foreign fighters, makes undoubtedly for a deeply worrisome spectacle.

This hearing, moreover, occurs at a moment of dangerous flux. The deployment of substantial numbers of Russian forces to Syria appears to be a game changer for Western strategy. We do not yet have a full understanding of Russian motives or goals, but it seems fair to say that the deployment has likely dashed any hopes that the Assad regime would finally be defeated or even pressured sufficiently so that it would come back to the negotiating table. Russian engagement in the fighting or simply enhanced Russian backing for the Assad government will likely mean more civilian casualties. Judging by press reports and Russian comments, the Putin government appears to want to deal ISIL a sharp blow – in part, it appears, because of the growing number of Chechen fighters in its ranks.

While there may be some reason for encouragement and perhaps cooperation with Russia in the fight against ISIL, it is important to reassert that no satisfactory military outcome appears to be in the making. Ultimately, a diplomatic solution will have to be found, and one that has the support of the regional Sunni powers. Otherwise, both the private donors and the national governments that have supported Sunni militias in Syria will respond to the strengthening of the Assad regime by pouring new resources into the fight. The conflict in Syria has repeatedly achieved equilibrium between rebels and government only to see one side or the other raise the stakes – a move inevitably matched by the other side. We cannot rule out that this will happen again if the Russian move is solely about strengthening Assad and weakening his enemies.

For these reasons, we need to engage the Russians constructively – no easy task given the tensions in the bilateral relationship due primarily to Russian aggression in Ukraine. We need to urge them to show restraint in their actions Syria and to harness their efforts to achieve a return to the negotiating table. It is truly a moment for innovative diplomacy, and in this regard, I share the view that we need to show more flexibility on the issue of the fate of the Assad government. While ultimately, a leader who has committed atrocities on the scale that Bashar al-Assad cannot be allowed to stay in power indefinitely, humanitarian and counterterrorism concerns demand that we be flexible about the modalities of his eventual departure.

To focus more specifically on counterterrorism issues, I believe efforts by the US-led coalition in Operation Inherent Resolve are achieving some progress toward degrading and defeating ISIL, but clearly not as much as hoped for. The key shortcoming is the absence of a capable ground force, which is essential for achieving the kind of success against ISIL necessary to reduce the long-term regional and terrorist threat.

Here there are two critical problems. First is the weak showing of the U.S. equip-and-train program that aims to put Syrian moderates in the field against ISIL. The shortcomings of this program have been laid out in great detail in the press and hardly need more elaboration here. Obviously, the cost-benefit ratio of the program to date is not encouraging to say the least. It may be that given the vetting standards we have set, reliable fighters are simply not available – that the polarization has gone too far, and that too many human rights abuses have been committed. Nonetheless, it would still be my recommendation that the Department of Defense push forward with the effort. We may yet learn that the problems lay elsewhere, and we could yet find ourselves in a position of wanting to have a US-trained force on the ground. In light of the way the Syrian civil war has unfolded, one would have to assume that the conflict could go on for quite a while. Against this backdrop, an investment in training still makes sense.

The second, and to my mind greater concern, is that our coalition partners are far from engaged as seriously as we would like. Our Western allies are showing growing commitment, and we should all welcome France's decision to launch air strikes against targets in Syria. Our regional allies however are mostly focused elsewhere. The Saudis and the smaller Gulf states remain principally interested in what we habitually call the sectarian conflict, even if one important dimension of it concerns rival states as much as contending religious sects. Exhibit A in this regard is the conflict in Yemen, where a humanitarian catastrophe is unfolding. Saudi Arabia's determination to extirpate the Houthis in Yemen is receiving far more attention and resources than the effort to roll back ISIL and Sunni extremism.

In short, our and our regional allies' agendas are at odds. They want to eliminate what they see – questionably in my view – as Iran's foothold on the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen. They also are still eager to see Assad driven from Damascus and that capital returned to the Sunni fold after many decades – and perhaps as a payback for the Shia ascendancy in Baghdad. The Gulf States believe ISIL can be dealt with afterward. We have prioritized the fight against ISIL, but, as the statistics on coalition airstrikes show

clearly, the regional partners are making very limited contributions. The sole bright spot in this picture has been the positive showing of the Syrian Kurdish forces of the YPG. But that group's area of operations is limited, and impressive as it has been in action, it is not capable of taking on ISIL over a broad territory.

Overall, this state of play does not bode well for our near-term prospects. Yet despite all this bad news, I believe the Administration's strategy for Syria remains very nearly the best available in an extraordinarily difficult situation. Over the long term, the threat of terrorism against the United States and its allies will be reduced. I make this claim for the following reasons:

ISIL is an extraordinarily barbaric group. Yet for all its grotesque violence – the decapitations, immolations, sexual violence and the like – it has yet to manifest itself as a first tier terrorist threat to the United States. To the best of my knowledge, although ISIL has called upon followers to carry out acts of “individual jihad” much as the late AQAP operative Anwar al-Awlaki did, no terrorist conspiracy of note has yet been attempted in the United States with ISIL command and control. The same is true of Jabhat al-Nusra.

To date, ISIL has demonstrated little interest in out-of-area attacks. Law enforcement agencies around the world have uncovered little in the way of cell structures in their countries. Perhaps most important, the group's strategy thus far differs significantly from al Qaeda's: The focus is not on carrying out catastrophic attacks against the U.S. and other Western powers as a strategy for forcing us to withdraw from the broader Middle East. Rather, the group now is deeply invested in its agenda of sectarian warfare and the creation of its “caliphate”. The origins of this strategy trace back to the group's first leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the approach has served it well thus far: ISIL's exercise in state-building has had a catalytic effect on the imaginations of a small segment of Muslim youth in a way that bin Laden would have envied. The group will likely continue focusing on these efforts since they are providing the forces they badly need and have made ISIL the leading jihadist group in the world – the team that other jihadists want to be part of.

I want to emphasize that we should not expect ISIL to forswear attacks against Western targets forever, and already there appears to be increasing chatter about undertaking more attacks of this kind. This was to be expected once we commenced air strikes against the group. Still we should remember that ISIL does not have a track record of covert foreign operations or long-term efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction, as al Qaeda did. Terrorist groups, like other organizations, have to choose carefully how they invest their time and resources. Thus far, the choice for ISIL has been warfare and terrorist attacks in Iraq and Syria. Developing more of an al Qaeda-like approach would be a serious and costly undertaking.

That kind of network approach is of course not the sum total of the threat. Much has been made of the danger posed by foreign fighters returning to their home countries – including the United States – to carry out attacks. Over the long-term, this is a real concern. To date, though – and the time period in question is not negligible – this threat

has also not materialized. The shootings at the Brussels Jewish Museum by Mehdi Nemouche remain a singular case, though there is still much that has not been made public about the cell that was disrupted in the Belgian city of Verviers earlier this year. Although law enforcement authorities are aware of hundreds and perhaps thousands of returnees from Syria and Iraq, evidence of a major threat has yet to materialize. Indeed, there is reason to believe that, for now, the returnees from Syria and Iraq are mostly broken and exhausted and perhaps disillusioned. These are not the mujahedin who returned from Afghanistan, believing that they had defeated a superpower and were determined to do more.

There is, as we saw so tragically in the Charlie Hebdo incident and in others in Canada, Australia, Denmark and elsewhere, a considerable number of radicalized individuals who are eager to make their mark. Whether we look at the events of the last year, the perpetrators and their operations show clear similarities. These are essentially low-tech assaults and hostage-takings, carried out by local militants with little or no direct involvement from major jihadist organizations. There may be some hybridism – for lack of a better word – such as we saw in the Charlie Hebdo plot, with al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula providing target guidance in its online publication *Inspire*, and perhaps giving one of the Kouachi brothers some training and money years ago. But again, to underscore, these incidents have not involved spectacular suicide bombings or complex assaults on large targets like Heathrow Airport or Wall Street. They have all claimed comparatively low numbers of casualties. This kind of violence represents the new normal in jihadist terrorism, and while it is a serious security threat, it less threatening to our societies than the catastrophic attacks we feared after 9/11.

The typical terrorists in these cases have been extremists who want to be part of the action, but at home. The spike in the frequency of attacks has been driven in part by the excitement of radical Islamists in the wake of ISIL's successes in capturing and holding territory in Iraq and Syria and the group's effort to create an independent caliphate. After almost a decade and a half of setbacks to al Qaeda, ISIL's capture of Mosul and control of territory from outside Aleppo to Ramadi has provided extremists with a powerful sense that history is turning their way.

(It is worth noting that even before ISIL captured extremists' attention, the new trend in terrorism was becoming clear, though attacks were less frequent. Early cases included the 2009 Ft. Hood shooting by Maj. Nidal Hassan, which killed 13, the 2012 shootings of seven in Toulouse and Montauban in France by a radicalized petty criminal and the stabbing of British soldier Lee Rigby in 2013 by a group of extremists. The Tsarnaev brothers who carried out the attack on the Boston Marathon belong in this group as well, since they operated without sustained outside guidance and used the crudest bombs imaginable.)

The ability to capture and hold territory – which al Qaeda failed to do – has had a remarkable galvanizing impact. I share the view of many that our efforts to curtail this wave of radicalization would be greatly advanced by a major blow to ISIL. This would

have a deflating effect and would create doubt for many who are in danger of being seduced by the apparent success of the group.

Unfortunately, in the near term, there is little likelihood of such a blow being struck – though the introduction of Russian forces adds a new and uncertain element. At the same time, we should not see this as a reason for despair or for discarding the current strategy. Although there is a debate over the quality of CENTCOM’s assessment of the damage done by US and coalition forces to ISIL, the air strikes have undoubtedly checked the group’s expansion and as they continue, they will destroy more ISIL assets, sap its strength and make a real breakout from the group’s current boundaries difficult to achieve. The reason this strategy should suffice for the foreseeable future is that the U.S. counterterrorism instruments that have been highly successful elsewhere are becoming more effective now in Syria and Iraq.

Specifically, in recent months, we have seen an accelerating campaign of drone and other airstrikes that are clearly based on communications and other intelligence and that have resulted in the deaths and wounding of a number of senior ISIL officials. Complementing these have been Special Forces operations that have led to the capture or death of high value targets and the acquisition of considerable amounts of materials with intelligence value. These operations demonstrate that the intelligence “base” necessary for an aggressive campaign – chiefly airborne – is being created.

Some would argue that given the numbers of ISIL managers and the sizable nature of its infrastructure, a counterterrorism approach like this will be insufficient to cause the necessary damage to ISIL. In response, I would argue that such a campaign would certainly not destroy ISIL, but it could cause senior leaders to spend most of their efforts on self-preservation, disrupt any terrorist planning that might be in the works and make it difficult or impossible to maintain high-quality military planning or achieve key “state-building” goals. This, in turn, makes an eventual ground campaign easier. I would add that I believe there is a good chance that one or more regional actors will eventually decide that ground operations against ISIL are necessary, even if they currently are focused on other issues. Degrading the group in the manner described above will certainly make such a campaign more palatable to regional militaries. A ground campaign will also become a more realistic possibility as the voices of discontent from within ISIL’s ranks multiply, as we are beginning to see.

A few concluding points:

- 1) Putting a sizable American force on the ground for a ground campaign against ISIL would be a major error. U.S. forces would undoubtedly inflict real losses on the group, but as we saw with the 2007 Surge, this effort would be a case of addressing symptoms, not the underlying disease. Since we are unlikely to place troops on the ground for a period of many years, our ability to prevent the revival of ISIL would be poor. Given the regional context of sectarian tensions, that revival would be nearly inevitable. The job of maintaining stability in the region

and diminishing extremism must belong to the countries in the neighborhood. Moreover, a U.S. deployment that aims at destroying ISIL will still be seen by our Sunni allies as an effective defense of Assad. That can cause real and enduring damage to important relationships.

- 2) We should be open to the possibility of altering how we embed forces with units of regional militaries – especially the Iraqis. Former Under Secretary of Defense Michele Flournoy, among others, has advocated changes that would have U.S. forces in a more forward posture, able to direct strikes. While this is not a near-term likelihood in Syria, it may make sense in Iraq, and for the time being, our prospects for success against ISIL will remain greater in Iraq.
- 3) Turkey's role in Syria is critically important. The U.S. and its partners need to engage Ankara vigorously to ensure that it does not complicate the current many-sided conflict into anti-Kurd campaign. Ankara has already seriously undermined years of positive work to diminish Turkish-Kurdish tensions internally and internationally. Its current orientation – and especially its hostility to the YPG – could have a powerful negative effect on US interests. Turkey, like our Gulf partners, needs to be steered into a more effective fight against jihadi extremists.
- 4) Finally, it is essential that the U.S. do more to alleviate the current refugee crisis in Syria's neighborhood and in Europe. Both by devoting more financial resources and by accepting larger numbers, the U.S. can show real leadership and increase the pressure on other nations to do their part. The refugee situation now poses a growing threat to European institutions and unity. If it worsens considerably, our national security interests – in Syria, Iraq, Central and Eastern Europe and elsewhere will be critically affected.

In Syria today, there is no shortage of reasons to be dispirited. But I am persuaded that what we require above all is strategic patience and perseverance. We learned all too painfully in Iraq the costs of haste. I strongly believe that we have the time and tools to reduce the danger of terrorist attack, and that we will benefit from a strategy that is careful, deliberate and cognizant of all the technologies and political trends that will help us.

I thank you for your time.