



Statement for the Record

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U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Before the

U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security

Regarding

**Countering Violent Islamist Extremism: The Urgent Threat of Foreign
Fighters and Homegrown Terror**

February 11, 2015

Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today—along with my colleagues from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), and the Department of State (DOS)—to discuss the foreign fighter threat and current efforts to disrupt terrorist travel.

For some time, the U.S. Government, including the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), has been concerned that terrorist groups operating in permissive environments present a significant security threat to the United States and to our allies. Events in Australia, Canada and, most recently, in France and Belgium underscore that the foreign fighter threat is no longer a problem restricted to foreign conflict zones such as those in northern Syria or western Iraq. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and other like-minded terrorist organizations have been effective in recruiting fighters from Western countries, as well as recruiting individuals for violent action at home for those who cannot travel to conflict zones. The threat is real, it continues to evolve, and it is a present danger to everyone across the globe. It includes people radicalized to violence overseas, or potentially here in the United States.

At present, we are unaware of any specific, credible, imminent threat to the Homeland; however, recent events have demonstrated the need for increased vigilance both at home and abroad. We recognize that the threat environment is ever evolving and becoming increasingly complex and decentralized. For that reason, DHS is continuing to encourage an informed and aware public, as promoted by the “see something, say something,” campaign, as well as our more specific bulletins. We must recognize protecting the Homeland is a shared responsibility.

In my testimony today, I will discuss the foreign fighter threat and highlight specific efforts DHS is undertaking to identify, address and minimize the foreign fighter threat to the United States and to our allies.

Foreign Fighter Threat

While much of today’s hearing will focus on terrorist threats from Syria and Iraq, it is important to emphasize that the terrorist threat is fluid and not constrained to one group, race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, or geographic location. Many terrorist groups continue to pose a risk to our security and safety.

Core al-Qa’ida (AQ), al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and AQ’s affiliates and adherents remain a major concern for DHS. Despite the deaths of many of AQ’s senior leaders, the group maintains the intent, and in some cases, the capability to facilitate and conduct attacks against U.S. citizens and facilities. The group has also demonstrated that it is capable of adjusting its tactics, techniques and procedures for targeting the West.

Events in recent weeks have also made it clear why DHS and others in the counterterrorism and law enforcement communities are concerned about the threats posed by terrorists operating out of Syria and Iraq. In addition to hard-core al-Qa'ida loyalists, a number of those involved in terrorist operations within Syria and Iraq are affiliated with ISIL. ISIL operates as if it were a military organization and aspires to overthrow governments in the region and eventually beyond. Their experience and successes on the battlefields in Syria and Iraq have armed this group with advanced capabilities that most terrorist groups do not have.

ISIL has also publicly threatened “direct confrontation” with the United States, which is consistent with the group’s media releases during the past several years that have alluded to attacking the United States. Through their sophisticated messaging capability, which includes the dissemination of high-quality media content on multiple online platforms, ISIL has been able to quickly reach a global audience and encourage acts of violence, as well as inspire U.S. citizens to travel to Syria to join in the conflict.

The ongoing conflict in Syria has emerged as a draw for more than 19,000 foreign fighters. We are aware of a number of U.S. Persons who have traveled or attempted to travel to Syria. More than 150 U.S. Persons and at least 3,400 Westerners have traveled or attempted to travel to Syria to participate in the conflict. We have also noted that veteran al-Qa'ida fighters have travelled from Pakistan to Syria to take advantage of the permissive operating environment and easy access to foreign fighters. We remain concerned about the threat of foreign fighters from the United States or elsewhere who may go to Syria and Iraq, become more radicalized to violence, and return to the United States or their home country and conduct attacks on their own or in concert with others. Furthermore, we also are concerned that U.S. Persons who join violent extremist groups in Syria could gain combat skills, violent extremist connections and possibly become persuaded to conduct organized or “lone-wolf” style attacks that target U.S. and Western interests. We also have become increasingly aware of the possibility that Syria could emerge as a base of operations for al-Qa'ida’s international agenda, which could include attacks against the Homeland.

DHS Response to the Foreign Fighter Threat

Aviation Security

Terrorist organizations like AQAP continue to pose a serious threat to international civil aviation. As we have seen in AQAP’s three attempted aviation attacks against the homeland—the airliner plot of December 2009, an attempted attack against U.S.-bound cargo planes in October 2010, and an airliner plot in May 2012—terrorist groups have shown a significant and growing sophistication in terms of bomb design and construction, operational skill, and innovation. In the past three years terrorists have become increasingly interested in circumventing airport security screening through the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs)

concealed in cargo, commercial electronics, physical areas of one's body, in shoes or clothing, and in cosmetics and liquids.

To address the terrorist threat to aviation, DHS continues to evaluate, modify and enhance aviation security measures. For example, beginning in July 2014, DHS required enhanced screening at select overseas airports with direct flights to the United States. Weeks later, DHS added additional airports to the list, with the United Kingdom and other countries following with similar enhancements to their required aviation security operations. Following recent world events, in January 2015, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) took steps to enhance the number of random searches of passengers and carry-on luggage boarding aircraft at U.S. airports. TSA, as directed by Secretary Johnson, is also conducting an immediate, short-term review to determine if additional security measures are necessary at both domestic and overseas last-point of departure airports. DHS will continue to evaluate the implementation of aviation security measures with air carriers and foreign airports to determine if more is necessary, and will make the appropriate aviation security adjustments without unduly burdening the traveling public.

In the long term, DHS is exploring the possibility of expanding preclearance operations at foreign airports with flights to the United States. This initiative provides for customs, immigration, and agriculture inspections of international air passengers and their goods by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials before the individual boards the plane for travel to the United States. Currently, CBP has preclearance operations at 15 airports and in 6 countries and, if appropriate, intends to enter into negotiations in order to expand air preclearance operations to new locations.

Information Sharing

Information sharing with our domestic and foreign partners is vital in identifying developing threats both here and abroad. DHS is committed to continuing our efforts, along with our colleagues in the Intelligence Community, to partner with European governments and other key counterterrorism allies to share information about terrorist threats.

Since its inception, DHS has sought to broaden and deepen international liaison efforts to improve its ability to share information with key foreign allies. DHS has worked closely with the European Union through the U.S.-EU Passenger Name Records Agreement to facilitate the transfer of Passenger Name Records information to DHS by airlines that are subject to EU data protection laws. This agreement provides the highest standard of security and privacy protection. In addition, DHS has used its close partnerships with the countries in the Visa Waiver Program and the Five Country Conference to improve our respective abilities to identify illicit travel. The Preventing and Combating Serious Crime Agreement that DHS and 40 foreign partners have signed provides each signatory with reciprocal access to fingerprint repositories for

the purposes of combating crime and terrorism. With the Five Country Conference, which includes Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, we have also concluded immigration information sharing agreements that reduce the likelihood that a person applying for asylum or a visa in any of the five countries who has an illicit past could hide that history. DHS also engages with foreign partners to share analytic and targeting methodology, chiefly by conducting analytic exchanges, to enhance the ability of DHS and foreign allies to identify individuals and travel routes, and prevent travel to foreign conflict zones.

DHS is working with our interagency partners to inform our state, local, tribal and territorial (SLTT) partners of recent events and threats. Following the Paris attacks, the Office of Intelligence and Analysis (I&A) prepared two Intelligence Notes and worked with the FBI to prepare and issue Joint Information Bulletins (JIBs); DHS shared both items nationally with fusion centers.

I&A continues to provide our state and local law enforcement partners with information about observable behavioral indicators of U.S. Persons planning or attempting travel to Syria. I&A has produced tailored assessments on the motivations of U.S. travelers, their travel patterns, the role social media is playing in radicalization to violence, and the ways in which U.S. Persons are providing material support to Syria-based violent extremist groups. Additionally, I&A has partnered with the FBI to produce JIBs and other products for state and local law enforcement on the trends and observable behaviors in individuals seeking to travel to Syria.

Tracking Foreign Fighters

DHS is increasing efforts to track those who enter and leave Syria and may later seek to travel to the United States without a State Department-issued visa under the Visa Waiver Program (VWP). Working with the Intelligence Community, DHS is aware that a number of foreign fighters in Syria have come from various VWP countries.

In response, this fall, DHS strengthened the security of the VWP through enhancements to the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA). Those changes went into effect on November 3, 2014. ESTA adds a significant layer of security to the VWP by enabling CBP to conduct security vetting of prospective VWP travelers to determine if they pose a law enforcement or security risk before they board aircraft destined for the United States. DHS determined that additional data will improve the Department's ability to screen prospective VWP travelers and more accurately and effectively identify those who pose a security risk to the United States. These improvements provide an additional layer of enduring security for the VWP and facilitate visa-free travel to the United States.

Because we view advance passenger screening as a critical element to an effective national counterterrorism capability, we have explained to many partner nations how they can compare

airline manifests and reservation data against terrorist watchlists and other intelligence about terrorist travel. This is an area where the United States has developed a capability significantly more advanced than most other nations, both in identifying illicit travel and in protecting the privacy and civil liberties of all travelers, and we have worked to share this know how in order to prevent terrorists from traveling the globe in anonymity. Developing this capability is also consistent with the new obligations introduced through UN Security Council Resolution 2178, introduced last year by President Obama.

DHS is also working with partner nations in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa to increase our information sharing to track Syrian foreign fighters. These efforts allow the United States greater visibility on potential threats to the Homeland, while similarly enhancing our partners' ability to track and prevent terrorist travel. The importance of this issue was highlighted by the United Nations Security Council's adoption of Resolution 2178 in September 2014, which provided new momentum for European and other governments to use air passenger screening technology and enhance information sharing through multilateral and bilateral channels.

Countering Violent Extremism

Homegrown violent extremists (HVEs) represent a persistent and often unpredictable threat based on their close familiarity with the United States and their ability to act with little or no warning as lone offenders or in small decentralized cells. Over the past few years we have seen self-mobilizing, independently operating HVEs plot to bomb high profile targets, such as the Federal Reserve Bank in New York, the U.S. Capitol, and commercial establishments in downtown Chicago, Tampa and Oakland. All these plots were disrupted.

To address the need to counter violent extremism (CVE) in the Homeland and to guard against the domestic "lone wolf"—someone who did not train at a terrorist camp or join the ranks of a terrorist organization overseas, but is inspired here at home by a group's social media, literature or violent extremist ideology—Secretary Johnson has directed DHS to build on our partnerships with state and local law enforcement in a way that enhances community relationships and builds resilience to violent extremist recruitment. DHS now has a senior executive whose sole responsibility is coordinating and improving the Department's CVE efforts.

DHS's approach emphasizes the strength of local communities and the premise that well-informed and well-equipped families, communities and frontline personnel represent the best defense against violent extremism. Over the past eight months, DHS has participated in a National Security Council (NSC)-coordinated interagency effort to work with Boston, Los Angeles and Minneapolis/St. Paul to facilitate and support the development of locally-based, and-driven, violent extremism prevention and intervention pilot frameworks. Additionally, since September 2014, Secretary Johnson has personally participated in direct engagement efforts with

critical stakeholders in Chicago, Columbus, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, and most recently, Boston, to hear how DHS can best support local efforts to counter violent extremism and address foreign terrorist fighters.

DHS CVE efforts, in partnership with NCTC, also include the development of the Community Awareness Briefing (CAB), which is designed to share unclassified information with stakeholders regarding the threat of violent extremism, as well as help communities and law enforcement develop the necessary understanding of al-Qa'ida, al-Shabaab, ISIL, and related affiliates' recruitment tactics as well as explore ways to address these threats at the local level. The CAB draws a parallel between the similar recruitment targets of all types of violent extremism. For example, the CAB uses the case study on the attack at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, WI to illustrate potential for violence from all types of violent extremists, including but not limited to violent white supremacists, violent eco-terrorists, violent Neo-Nazis, criminal gangs (such as MS-13), and international terrorist groups. Due to the increased number of Western-based fighters traveling to foreign war conflicts, such as Syria and Somalia, the CAB now includes information relating to the foreign terrorist fighter recruitment narrative by al-Shabaab and ISIL.

Beyond our borders, DHS collaborates with partner countries (such as the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Canada, Spain and France) to develop best practices in community engagement endeavors that effectively counter violent extremism. Following the Paris attacks, DHS worked with some of these countries and the Department of State to link members of civil society and community stakeholders in respective countries so that they could coordinate and build grass roots responses to the attacks in Paris.

DHS is also working closely with the NSC staff, the Department of State, the Department of Justice including the FBI, and NCTC to plan the February 18-19, 2015, CVE Summit which will bring together key stakeholders from national and local governments around the world as well as the private sector, civil society, and community leaders to develop an action agenda address violent extremism in all its forms. Furthermore, DHS is working with the Department of State on the Global Counterterrorism Forum Workshop, which will be held on February 23 and 24 in Washington, DC and will build on the CVE Summit. This workshop will focus on ways in which communities and governments can develop specific programs and efforts to address the issue of foreign terrorist fighters. France, Canada, Australia and others will address the recent attacks they have faced and solutions they are developing to deal with this threat.

Conclusion

The terrorist threat is dynamic, as those who operate individually or as part of a terrorist organization will continue to challenge our security measures and our safety. DHS will continue to work with our international counterparts and our colleagues within the FBI, NCTC,

Department of State and the Intelligence Community, to identify potential threats to our security, both at home and abroad.

Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to answering your questions.