



Statement for the Record

The Honorable Francis X. Taylor

Under Secretary, Office of Intelligence and Analysis

U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Before the

U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security

Regarding

Terrorism Gone Viral: The Attack in Garland, Texas and Beyond

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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) and the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC),—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 U.S. and our allies. Events in Australia, Canada, and Europe underscore that the foreign fighter threat is no longer a problem restricted to foreign conflict zones such as those in 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.

The threat is real, continues to evolve, and is a present danger across the globe. The recent attack in Garland, Texas demonstrates the importance of close collaboration among I&A, FBI, NCTC, and our federal, state, local, and private sector partners. Prior to the art exhibit event at the Curtis Culwell Center, the Intelligence Community (IC) shared information with Texas fusion centers indicating the event had a risk of being targeted by violent extremists. When the perpetrators opened fire outside the exhibit on May 3, 2015, the attack was thwarted by the Garland Police Department. The information shared with Texas officials contributed to the overall threat picture and helped inform their security procedures for the event.

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 capable of self-advocacy, as promoted by the “If You See Something, Say Something™” campaign, as well as our more specific bulletins. We 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 U.S. 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 cannot be associated with 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) and its affiliates, such as al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), remain a major concern for DHS. Despite the deaths of many of AQ’s senior leaders, the group and its affiliates maintain the intent, and, in some cases, the capability to facilitate and conduct

attacks against U.S. citizens and facilities. The group and its affiliates have also demonstrated that capability to adjust 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 al-Qa'ida loyalists, a number of those involved in terrorist operations within Syria and Iraq are affiliated with ISIL. ISIL aspires to gain territory and attempt to overthrow governments in the region and eventually beyond. The group's experience and successes on the battlefields in Syria and Iraq have armed it with advanced capabilities that most terrorist groups do not have.

ISIL has also publicly threatened "direct confrontation" with the U.S., which is consistent with the group's media releases since last summer that have alluded to attacking the U.S. 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. Also on a daily basis, Syria-based ISIL members are attempting to recruit and radicalize to violence Western HVEs on social media, especially Twitter. The reach and popularity of social media has lowered the bar for Homegrown Violent Extremists (HVEs) to connect with terrorist organizations, such as ISIL.

ISIL's calls for lone offender attacks are likely resonating with HVEs because the group's self-proclaimed Caliphate resonates with individuals looking to be part of a larger cause, it regularly releases high-quality English-language videos and online magazines online, and their Western fighters are accessible on social media to HVEs interested in mobilizing. The IC assesses there is currently an elevated threat of HVE lone offender attacks by ISIL sympathizers, such as the Garland attackers, which is especially concerning because mobilized lone offenders present law enforcement with limited opportunities to detect and disrupt their plots.

The ongoing conflict in Syria has emerged as a draw for more than 22,000 foreign fighters. More than 180 U.S. Persons and at least 3,700 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 traveled from Pakistan to Syria to take advantage of the permissive operating environment and easy access to foreign fighters. We remain concerned that foreign fighters from the U.S. or elsewhere who may go to Syria and Iraq, become more radicalized to violence, and return to the U.S. 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 and connections with violent extremists, and possibly become persuaded to conduct organized or lone-actor style attacks that target U.S. and Western interests abroad. We also are 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 U.S. 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, conducted an immediate, short-term review to determine if additional security measures are necessary at both domestic and overseas last-point of departure airports. DHS continues 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 U.S. 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 U.S. 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 IC, 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 serious crime and terrorism. Along with the immigration authorities of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, we participate in the Five Country Conference. We have been negotiating a series of bilateral immigration information sharing agreements with those countries that would 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 foreign fighter travel to foreign conflict zones.

DHS is working with our interagency partners to inform our state, local, tribal, territorial, and private sector (SLTTP) partners of recent events and threats. Following the Paris *Charlie Hebdo* 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 nationwide with fusion centers. I&A field personnel, in partnership with DHS Office of Infrastructure Protection's Protective Security Advisors, are instrumental in threat information/intelligence dissemination to our SLTTP partners, characterizing threat information to jurisdictions, and proposing protective security considerations to prevent or mitigate terrorist activities. More recently, events in Garland, Texas highlight the critical importance of close collaboration between I&A and other federal and SLTTP partners. The sharing of threat information concerning the art exhibit at the Curtis Culwell Center contributed to state and local law enforcement's overall threat picture for the event, which helped local authorities establish appropriate security procedures given the nature of the threat. Ultimately, the enhanced security posture helped prevent a potentially devastating mass casualty event.

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 U.S. without a Department of State (DOS)-issued visa under the Visa Waiver Program (VWP). Working with the IC, DHS is working to ensure that individuals traveling from VWP countries are subject to enhanced vetting advance of travel to ensure national security and public safety.

In response, this fall, DHS strengthened the security of the VWP through enhancements to the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA). Through ESTA, CBP conducts enhanced vetting of VWP applicants in advance of travel to the United States in order to assess whether they are eligible to travel under the VWP or could pose a national security risk or public safety threat. Through interagency information sharing agreements, CBP provides other U.S. Government agencies ESTA application data for law enforcement and administrative purposes to help assess risk and make a determination about an alien's eligibility to travel under the VWP without a visa. Additionally, CBP requires air carriers to verify that VWP travelers have a valid authorization before boarding an aircraft bound for the United States. ESTA has been a highly effective security and vetting tool that has enabled DHS to deny travel under the VWP to thousands of prospective travelers who may pose a risk to the United States, prior to those individuals boarding a U.S. bound aircraft. In response to increasing concerns regarding foreign fighters attempting to enter the United States through the VWP, DHS strengthened the security of the program through enhancements to ESTA. These improvements are designed to address the current foreign fighter threat, and provide an additional layer of security for the VWP. DHS determined that these ESTA enhancements would 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. In addition, these enhancements to ESTA help the Department facilitate adjudication of ESTA applications. By requiring ESTA applicants to provide additional information, DHS can more precisely identify ESTA applicants who may be known or suspected terrorists. These enhancements also reduce the number of inconclusive matches that would previously have resulted in an ESTA denial.

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 U.S. 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 U.S. 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

HVEs from a range of ideological and religious backgrounds represent a persistent and often unpredictable threat based on their close familiarity with the U.S. and their ability to act with little or no warning as lone offenders or in small cells. Over the past few years we have seen 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 offender"—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, the DHS Coordinator for Countering Violent Extremism, whose sole responsibility is coordinating and improving the Department's CVE efforts.

To ensure a unified effort that fulfills opportunities and meets objectives, the Secretary recently tasked the DHS Coordinator for Countering Violent Extremism to update the current CVE Approach and develop a Department-wide CVE strategy. The new DHS CVE Strategy aims to improve the Department's ability to: engage with local community partners; partner with the interagency and international community; provide best-in-class online innovation and analysis; and support CVE practitioners with research, training and threat information. Under this strategy, DHS Offices and Components will prioritize CVE Activities within their mission areas.

As part of the strategy, the Department plans to help cities and regions build and utilize local CVE frameworks for all forms of violent extremism threatening the homeland, and to encourage communities to develop their own intervention efforts to counter violent extremism. Within the limitations of appropriate government action, we will address the evolving nature of online recruitment and radicalization to violence - particularly violent extremist use of social media - by encouraging credible voices to challenge and counter violent extremism.

Ultimately, this strategy aims to increase awareness among community members who may be in a better position to counter violent extremism. With increased training, analysis and information sharing between the Department and state and local law enforcement, fusion centers, and first responders, we will increase the law enforcement understanding of violent extremism and how we can best mitigate threats.

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.

On February 18, 2015, the White House hosted a CVE Summit that focused on both domestic and international CVE efforts. Prior to the Summit, DHS hosted a roundtable discussion with Vice President Biden and domestic stakeholders on February 17, 2015, at the White House. The Summit included the rolling out of piloted prevention and intervention programs in Boston, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis-St. Paul; DHS plans to evaluate these efforts and facilitate expansion to other municipalities. Under this initiative, DHS and the interagency encouraged local partners to develop mechanisms for engaging the resources and expertise available from a range of new partners, including the private sector as well as social service providers including education administrators, mental health professionals, and community leaders. As next steps, DHS is working with the interagency to further support prevention and intervention efforts in Boston, Los Angeles, Minneapolis-St. Paul and efforts elsewhere around the country while seeking to expand support efforts to other cities.

Additionally, since September 2014, Secretary Johnson has personally participated in direct engagement efforts with critical stakeholders in Chicago, Columbus, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Boston, Boston and most recently, New York, 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 other entities' 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, Wisconsin 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 conflicts, such as Syria and Somalia, the CAB now includes information relating to the foreign terrorist fighter recruitment narrative by al-Shabaab and ISIL. CABs have been successfully conducted in 15 U.S. cities thus far.

Beyond our borders, DHS collaborates with partner countries, including the United Kingdom, Australia, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, 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 DOS 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, DOS, the Department of Justice including the FBI, and NCTC to prepare for the CVE Regional Ministerial Summit planned for June 11-12, 2015 in Australia. I will be leading the U.S. delegation to this 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 to address violent extremism in all its forms.

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 and NCTC and across the IC 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.