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Thank you Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, and members of the Committee. I appreciate this opportunity to discuss the threats that concern us most. I'm pleased to join my colleagues and close partners from the Department of Homeland Security and Federal Bureau of Investigation. (U)

Threat Overview

With the fourteenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks several weeks behind us, it's clear that we've had great success at substantially reducing the chances of that kind of attack recurring. We've done that not only with aggressive CT action against core al-Qa'ida in South Asia and around the world but also through the array of defenses we've erected as a country. The counterterrorism and homeland security infrastructure that exists gives us much greater defense, disruption, and mitigation capabilities that we did not have at the time of those attacks. (U)

That said, the array of extremist terrorist actors around the globe is broader, wider, and deeper than it has been at any time since 9/11, and the threat landscape is less predictable. While the scale of the capabilities of these violent extremist actors does not rise to the level that core al-Qa'ida had at its disposal at the time of 9/11, it is fair to say that we face more threats originating in more places and involving more individuals than we have at any time in the last fourteen years. (U)

We remain intensely focused on the threat from ISIL. There is no doubt that the group views itself as being in direct conflict with the West. ISIL's access to resources—in terms of both manpower and funds—and territorial control in areas of Syria and Iraq are the ingredients that we traditionally look at as being critical to the development of an external operations capability. We are very concerned and focused on ISIL's trajectory in this regard. ISIL must also win the war on the ground in Syria and Iraq, which remains, we believe, a top priority for the group's leadership. This is in addition to advancing their effort to establish and administer branches in areas further afield, branches that are demonstrating increased operational capabilities in their respective regions. (U)

We are coming to view the threat from ISIL as a spectrum, where on one end, individuals draw inspiration from ISIL's media content and perceive successes. At the other end, individuals may receive direct guidance from ISIL members. These ends of the spectrum are not polar

opposites, however. Rather, they are the clearest illustrations of what is more often than not a very fluid picture where individuals operate between the two extremes. (U)

The tremendous efforts being made to counter the ISIL threat are absolutely warranted, but I want to stress that we still view al-Qa'ida and the various al-Qa'ida affiliates and nodes as being a principal counterterrorism priority. We would not tier our priorities in such a way that downgrades al-Qa'ida in favor of greater focus on ISIL. When we are looking at the set of threats that we face as a nation, al-Qa'ida threats still figure prominently in that analysis. (U)

The steady attrition of al-Qa'ida senior leaders has put more and more pressure on the few that remain. We believe we have constrained both their effectiveness and their ability to recruit, train, and deploy operatives from their safe haven in South Asia; however, this does not mean that the threat from core al-Qa'ida resident in the tribal areas of Pakistan or in eastern Afghanistan has been eliminated entirely. (U)

Ahead of the US military's drawdown in Afghanistan, we in the intelligence realm are trying to understand the level of risk the US may face over time if al-Qa'ida regenerates, finds renewed safe haven, or restores lost capability. I am confident that we will retain sufficient capability to continue to put pressure on that core al-Qa'ida network so that that situation will not arise. (U)

We as an intelligence community will be very much on alert for signs that that capability is being restored, and we would warn immediately should we find ourselves trending in that direction. All that said, I'm still not ready to declare core al-Qa'ida as having been defeated in the classical sense of the word where the capability has been removed. So long as the group can regenerate capability, al-Qa'ida will remain a threat. (U)

We also see increasing competition between extremist actors within South Asia itself, between and among the Taliban, ISIL's branch in South Asia, and al-Qa'ida. This is an additional dynamic that we are working to understand. While conflict among terrorist groups may well distract them from their core mission of plotting attacks against Western targets, conflict also serves to introduce a degree of uncertainty into the terrorism landscape that raises questions that I don't think we have answers to yet. This is something that we will watch very closely. (U)

Stepping back, there are two trends in the contemporary threat environment that concern us most. First is the increasing ability of terrorist actors to communicate with each other outside our reach. The difficulty in collecting precise intelligence on terrorist intentions and the status of particular terrorist plots is increasing over time. (U)

There are several reasons for this: exposure of intelligence collection techniques; disclosures of classified information that have given terrorist groups a better understanding of how we collect intelligence; and terrorist group's innovative and agile use of new means of

communicating, including ways in which they understand are beyond our ability to collect. I know that FBI Director Comey has spoken about these challenges on a number of occasions. (U)

Second, while we've seen a decrease in the frequency of large-scale, complex plotting efforts that sometimes span several years, we've seen a proliferation of more rapidly evolving threat or plot vectors that emerge simply by an individual encouraged to take action, then quickly gathering the few resources needed and moving into an operational phase. This is something I would tie very much to the modus operandi of ISIL-inspired terrorists. The so-called "flash to bang" ratio in plotting of this sort is extremely compressed, and allows little time for traditional law enforcement and intelligence tools to disrupt or mitigate potential plots. (U)

ISIL is aware of this, and those connected to the group have understood that by motivating actors in their own locations to take action against Western countries and targets, they can be effective. In terms of propaganda and recruitment, they can generate further support for their movement, without carrying out catastrophic, mass-casualty attacks. And that's an innovation in the terrorist playbook that poses a great challenge. (U)

Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)

The growing number of individuals going abroad as foreign terrorist fighters to Iraq and Syria only emphasizes the importance of prevention. Any hope of enduring security against terrorism or defeating organizations like ISIL rests in our ability to diminish the appeal of terrorism and dissuade individuals from joining them in the first place. (U)

To this end, we continue to refine and expand the preventive side of counterterrorism. We have seen a steady proliferation of more proactive and engaged community awareness efforts across the United States, with the goal of giving communities the information and the tools they need to see extremism in their midst and do something about it before it manifests itself in violence. NCTC, in direct collaboration with DHS, has led the creation of CVE tools to build community resilience across the country. (U)

Working and closely coordinating with the Department of Justice (DOJ), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), NCTC is engaged in this work all across the country. (U)

We, in concert with DOJ, DHS, and FBI, sent our officers on multiple occasions to meet with the communities in places such as Denver, Sacramento, Buffalo, and Minneapolis to raise awareness among community and law enforcement audiences about the terrorist recruitment threat. Our briefing, developed in partnership with DHS, is now tailored to address the specific issue of foreign fighter recruitment in Syria and Iraq; and we have received a strong demand signal for more such outreach. (U)

This is not a law enforcement-oriented effort designed to collect information. Rather, it is an effort to share information about how members of our communities are being targeted and recruited to join terrorists overseas. Seen in that light, we have had a remarkably positive reaction from the communities with whom we have engaged. (U)

We continue to expand our CVE tools. With our DHS colleagues, we have created and regularly deliver the Community Resilience Exercise, a table top exercise that brings together local law enforcement with community leadership to run through a hypothetical case study based scenario featuring a possible violent extremist or foreign fighter. (U)

We also aim to encourage the creation of intervention models at the local level. In the same way that local partners, including law enforcement, schools, social service providers, and communities, have come together to provide alternative pathways and off-ramps for people who might be vulnerable to joining a gang, we are encouraging our local partners to implement similar models for violent extremism. The more resilient the community, the less likely its members are to join a violent extremist group. (U)

Conclusion

In summary, confronting these threats and working with resolve to prevent another terrorist attack remains the counterterrorism community's overriding mission. I can assure you that we at NCTC are focused on positioning ourselves to be better prepared to address the terrorist threat in the coming years. We expect this threat will increasingly involve terrorists' use of the online platforms that I mentioned earlier in my remarks. (U)

Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you this morning. I want to assure you that our attention is concentrated on the security crises in Iraq and Syria—and rightly so—but we continue to detect, disrupt, and defeat threats from across the threat spectrum in concert with our partners. (U)

Thank you all very much, and I look forward to answering your questions. (U)