

The Terrorism Threat to the United States and Implications for Refugees

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*U.S. Homeland Security and the Threat from Syria and Iraq*²

Before the Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence
United States House of Representatives

June 24, 2015

Chairman King, Ranking Member Higgins, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, thank you for inviting me to testify at this important hearing, “Admitting Syrian Refugees: The Intelligence Void and the Emerging Homeland Security Threat.” I have divided my comments into four sections. The first provides an overview of the wars in Syria and neighboring Iraq, the second focuses on the terrorism threat to the United States, the third outlines the foreign-fighter problem from Syria and Iraq, and the fourth examines the implications for Syrian refugees.

I. Update on the Wars in Syria and Iraq

The wars in Syria and Iraq, which are deeply intertwined, continue to impact U.S. national security.

In Syria, the United States is providing limited support to some Syrian rebels against Da’ish—also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), or simply Islamic State (IS)—under the congressionally approved train-and-equip program.³ However, U.S.-led airstrikes have been insufficient to seriously degrade Da’ish in Syria. Over the rest of 2015, Da’ish is likely to remain highly capable because of its access to resources and its ability to replace killed and captured leaders. Da’ish has recently strengthened control in such Syrian areas as Homs, Dayr az Zawr, and Ar Raqqa. In addition, the al Qa’ida–affiliated Jabhat al-Nusrah has also increased its control of territory. In fact, Jabhat al-Nusrah may be more capable now—with more fighters, funds, and territory—than at any time since its creation in 2011, and it retains a stronghold in northwestern Syrian areas such as Idlib. The recent capture of the

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² This testimony is available for free download at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT433.html>.

³ Da’ish is an acronym from the Arabic name of the group, al-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fil ‘Iraq wal-Sham.

town of Jisr al-Shughour in northern Idlib province was just the latest in a string of battlefield victories by rebel forces, which have made advances in both the north and the south of the country.⁴

In neighboring Iraq, the United States is engaged in a counterinsurgency campaign against Da'ish and its allies. After nearly ten months of bombing and U.S. military, intelligence, and diplomatic support to the Iraqi government and local actors, Da'ish has lost ground in some areas—including most recently in Tikrit. But Da'ish still retains substantial territory in the predominantly Sunni provinces of Anbar, Salaheddine, and Nineveh. In addition, Da'ish remains well-funded, allowing it to continue operations. Its funding comes from such activities as smuggling oil, selling stolen goods, kidnapping and extortion, seizing bank accounts, and smuggling antiquities.⁵ Da'ish's capture of Ramadi in May 2015—despite an intensified U.S. bombing campaign—indicates that the organization retains significant capabilities in some areas.⁶

II. The Terrorist Threat to the U.S. Homeland

In understanding the threat from Syria and Iraq, it is important to understand the broader context. Not all terrorist groups present a direct threat to the U.S. homeland. As Table 1 highlights, terrorist groups can be divided into three categories: those that pose a high threat because they are involved in plotting or instigating attacks against the U.S. homeland; those that pose a medium threat because they are involved in plotting attacks against U.S. structures, such as embassies and U.S. citizens overseas (though not against the U.S. homeland); and those that pose a low threat because they are focused on targeting local regimes or other countries.⁷ Two terrorist groups operating in Syria—Da'ish and the Khorasan Group—present high threats (Table 1).

⁴ See, for example, Liz Sly, "Assad's Hold on Power Looks Shakier Than Ever as Rebels Advance in Syria," *Washington Post*, April 26, 2015.

⁵ See, for example, Patrick B. Johnston, *Countering ISIL's Financing: Testimony Presented Before the House Financial Services Committee on November 13, 2014*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, CT-419, 2014. On antiquities, see Financial Action Task Force, *Financing of the Terrorist Organization Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)*, Paris: Financial Action Task Force, February 2015.

⁶ See, for example, Tim Arango, "ISIS Captures Key Iraqi City Despite Strikes," *New York Times*, May 18, 2015; Hugh Naylor and Mustafa Salim, "Key City in Iraq Falls to Militants," *Washington Post*, May 18, 2015.

⁷ Seth G. Jones, *A Persistent Threat: The Evolution of Al Qaeda and Other Salafi Jihadists*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-637-OSD, 2014.

Table 1: Examples of Terrorists That Threaten the United States

	High Threat	Medium Threat	Low Threat
Characteristics	Plotting or instigating attacks against the U.S. homeland and U.S. targets overseas (e.g., U.S. embassies and citizens)	Plotting attacks against U.S. targets overseas (e.g., U.S. embassies and citizens)	Limited or no active plotting against U.S. homeland or U.S. targets overseas
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula • Core al Qa'ida (including the Khorasan Group) • Da'ish • Some inspired individuals and networks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Al Shabaab • Jabhat al-Nusrah • Ansar al-Sharia Libya groups • Al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb • Boko Haram 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • East Turkestan Islamic Movement • Suqor al-Sham

First, some groups pose a high threat. Since its expansion in Iraq and Syria, Da'ish has become a growing threat to the United States. Rather than the complex attacks on 9/11, which involved years of training and meticulous planning, the most likely Da'ish threat today comes from smaller, less-sophisticated attacks from inspired individuals who may have limited or no connections to the organization. Core al Qa'ida, based in Pakistan, also presents a threat to the U.S. homeland. But their leaders have had difficulty recruiting—or even inspiring—competent operatives in the West. That's why Ayman al-Zawahiri sent a small group of operatives, referred to as the Khorasan Group, to Syria to plot attacks in Europe and the United States. Another is al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, which provided training to two of the operatives involved in the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, Said and Cherif Kouachi. Several Yemen-based operatives—including leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi—continue to plot attacks against the United States. In addition, a small number of inspired individuals, such as the Tsarnaev brothers, who perpetrated the April 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, pose a threat. Still, terrorists have had difficulty striking the U.S. homeland because of robust counterterrorism steps by the Department of Homeland Security, Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Intelligence Community, and other federal and local agencies.

Second, several extremist groups pose a medium-level threat because of their interest and capability to target U.S. citizens overseas, though they have little interest or ability to strike the U.S. homeland. Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia, for instance, has planned attacks against U.S. diplomats and infrastructure in Tunisia, including the U.S. Embassy. Several groups with a presence in Libya—such as the various Ansar al-Sharia Libya branches and al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb—also pose a threat to U.S. embassies and citizens in North Africa; so does al Shabaab in Somalia. Its objectives are largely parochial: to establish an extreme Islamic emirate in Somalia and the broader region. Al Shabaab possesses a competent external operations capability to strike targets in East Africa. The September 2013 Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi, Kenya, was

well-planned and well-executed, and involved sophisticated intelligence collection, surveillance, and reconnaissance of the target.

Third, some extremist groups present a low-level threat to the United States. These groups do not possess the capability or intent to target the United States at home or overseas. They include such organizations as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which is primarily interested in Chinese targets.

III. Foreign Fighter Challenge from Syria and Iraq

Of particular concern for the United States is the growing number of extremists—both Sunni and Shi'a—that have traveled to (and from) Syria and Iraq to fight. The Syrian-Iraqi battlefield likely has the largest concentration of foreign extremists of any jihadist battlefield in the modern era. There have been over 20,000 foreign fighters who have traveled to Syria to fight. Approximately 3,400 fighters, or 17 percent, appear to be coming from the West. Approximately 200 Americans are known to have attempted to travel to Syria to fight with Islamic militants.⁸ It is difficult to predict whether most of the foreign fighters will remain in Syria, Iraq, and other countries over the long run to fight or die on the battlefield; move to future war zones; or return to the United States and other Western countries. Even if some return, it is uncertain whether they will become involved in terrorist plots, focus on recruiting and fundraising, or become disillusioned with terrorism. Still, foreign fighters have historically been agents of instability. Volunteering for war is often the principal stepping stone for individual involvement in more extreme forms of militancy—including in the United States.

Indeed, there have been a growing number of attacks and plots across the West tied either formally or informally to Syria and Iraq. These include attacks in Garland, Texas, in May 2015; Copenhagen, Denmark, in February 2015; Paris, France, in January 2015; Sydney, Australia, in December 2014; Ottawa, Canada, in October 2014; and Brussels, Belgium, in May 2014. More broadly, there were over 20 terrorist plots in the West either directed or provoked by extremist groups in Syria between October 2013 and January 2015.⁹ Da'ish has been linked directly or

⁸ The data are from the National Counterterrorism Center. See Nicholas J. Rasmussen, *Current Terrorist Threat to the United States: Hearing before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*, February 12, 2015.

⁹ The data are from the UK's Security Service, or MI5. See Andrew Parker, Director General of the Security Service (MI5), "Terrorism, Technology and Accountability," Address to the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) at Thames House, January 8, 2015.

indirectly to plots in such countries as France, Australia, Belgium, Libya, Tunisia, and the United States.¹⁰

There is also significant concern among America's European allies about the threat from Syria and Iraq. For instance, more than 600 British extremists have traveled to Syria and Iraq.¹¹ Many have joined Da'ish. "We know that terrorists based in Syria harbor the same ambitions towards the UK—trying to direct attacks against our country, and exhorting extremists here to act independently," said MI5 director-general Andrew Parker in a January speech.¹² Similar to the United States, the British face a complex threat, with more extremists than MI5 and the Metropolitan Police Service's Counter Terrorism Command, or SO15, can cover at any one time. Despite these challenges, MI5 and the police remain aggressive. In England and Wales, there has been a 35-percent increase in terrorist-related arrests since 2011. And more than 140 individuals have been convicted for terrorism-related offenses since 2010.¹³

The British are not alone. Counterterrorism agencies across Europe and North America are under tremendous pressure to prevent terrorist attacks. French authorities report that nearly 1,400 French citizens have gone to Syria—or tried to go. French authorities arrested 91 persons suspected of extremist activity in 2012—and another 143 persons in 2013.¹⁴

IV. Implications for Refugees and the U.S. Homeland

Based on these threats, it is important to examine potential risks from increased refugee flows from the region. In February 2015, the Department of State noted that it was "likely to admit 1,000 to 2,000 Syrian refugees for permanent resettlement in Fiscal Year 2015 and a somewhat higher number, though still in the low thousands, in Fiscal Year 2016."¹⁵

Refugees have historically played—and will continue to play—a critical role in ensuring U.S. economic prosperity and cultural diversity. In addition, the threat to the U.S. homeland from refugees has been relatively low. Almost none of the major terrorist plots since 9/11 have involved refugees. Even in those cases where refugees were arrested on terrorism-related

¹⁰ These attacks have generally not involved returned foreign fighters, but rather individuals inspired directly or indirectly by Da'ish.

¹¹ Parker, 2015.

¹² Parker, 2015.

¹³ Parker, 2015.

¹⁴ Brian Michael Jenkins and Jean-Francois Clair, "Predicting the 'Dangerousness' of Potential Terrorists," *The Hill*, March 26, 2015; Jenkins and Clair, "Different Countries, Different Ways of Countering Terrorism," *The Hill*, February 27, 2015.

¹⁵ Jen Psaki, U.S. State Department Daily Press Briefing, Washington, D.C., February 13, 2015.

charges, years and even decades often transpired between their entry into the United States and their involvement in terrorism. In most instances, a would-be terrorist's refugee status had little or nothing to do with their radicalization and shift to terrorism.

But risks associated with refugees from Syria may be higher today for several reasons. First, Syria and neighboring Iraq have the highest numbers of foreign fighters on any modern jihadist battlefield, and there has already been an exodus of some fighters to the West. Second, several groups in the region like Da'ish have planned to put operatives in the West, particularly in Europe, by having them seek political refugee status. Da'ish has also been active in some refugee camps in Syria. Third, the U.S. Intelligence Community's understanding of extremists in Syria is worse than in many other jihadist battlefields, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, because of more limited intelligence collection capabilities.

Individual terrorists and terrorist groups have multiple options to attack the U.S. homeland. First, they can inspire and encourage locals to conduct attacks through magazines like *Dabiq* (published by Da'ish) and *Inspire* (published by al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula). Second, they can infiltrate members into the United States from overseas to conduct attacks or recruit operatives from U.S. communities. Third, they can target aircraft or vessels coming into the United States. In 2010, for example, al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula attempted to target cargo planes using plastic explosives hidden in printer cartridges.

Refugees have occasionally been involved in the first two types of plots. Perhaps the best-known case involved Waad Ramadan and Alwan Mohanad Shareef Hammadi, who were arrested on federal terrorism charges in 2009 in Bowling Green, Kentucky. They had been granted refugee status despite their insurgent activities in Iraq and their role in attacking U.S. troops. The Bowling Green arrests led to numerous changes in how the United States processed refugees and asylum-seekers. The process had been haphazard, partly because there were so many refugees and asylum-seekers—including from Iraq—being processed through the system. But there were also challenges because the data were not well organized across the U.S. government.

Overall, there are a small number of cases in which refugees have been arrested on terrorism-related charges in the United States. Examples include the following:

- a Bosnian refugee in St. Louis (arrested in 2015)
- a Somali refugee in Minneapolis (2015)
- an Uzbek refugee in Boise, Idaho (2013)
- two Chechen refugees in Boston (2013)

- an Uzbek refugee in Aurora, Colorado (2012)
- two Iraqi refugees in Bowling Green, Kentucky (2011)
- a Somali refugee in Columbus, Ohio (2011)
- a Somali refugee in St. Louis, Missouri (2010)
- a Somali refugee in Portland, Oregon (2010)
- an Afghan refugee in Aurora, Colorado (2009)

There have been other cases in Canada. Ahmed Ressay, the millennium bomber who was convicted in 2001 of planning to bomb Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) on New Year's Eve 1999, had applied to Canada as a refugee. He was denied refugee status, but still managed to remain in Canada before attempting to attack the United States. Raed Jaser, who pled guilty in March 2015 to involvement in a terrorist plot that targeted a train route between Toronto and New York City, had applied for refugee status in Canada as a Palestinian. The Canadian government rejected his family's refugee claims. But since the family was stateless, the government allowed family members to stay in the country under Canada's "deferred removal" program. Finally, Sayfildin Tahir Sharif (also known as Faruq Khalil Muhammad 'Isa), who was arrested in Canada in 2011 on a U.S. warrant, had moved to Canada as a refugee from Iraq.

Because of these concerns, the United States should reassess its refugee program and make sure it safeguards national security. As already noted, a number of changes were implemented after the Bowling Green arrests. It is worth examining whether there needs to be enhanced screening and data collection for applicants, such as

- additional background checks and other screening protocols in place at the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Bureau of Investigation for screening refugee applicants—including Syrian applicants—through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP).
- improved data management of potentially concerning refugees. Some of the mistakes in the past were not due to screening errors, but rather caused by poor data management. Information on terrorist links never made it to the right databases.
- an enhanced U.S. Intelligence Community role in implementing heightened measures to vet potential refugees from countries of concern, including Syria. Some of this has already occurred through such programs as the National Counterterrorism Center's Kingfisher Expansion program.
- enhanced re-screening procedures for refugees who have entered the United States

- better engagement with Visa Waiver Program countries out of concern that refugees from Syria, Iraq, or other high-risk countries could be resettled there and then enter the United States with a lower level of scrutiny
- additional authorities to hold data collected in refugee camps.

The United States has a long-standing tradition of offering protection and freedom to refugees who live in fear of persecution, some of whom are left to languish in deplorable conditions of temporary asylum. An integral part of that mission needs to be ensuring that those refugees considered for entry into the United States, including from such jihadist battlefields as Syria, do not present a risk to the safety and security of the United States.