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# COUNTERING VIOLENT ISLAMIST EXTREMISM: THE URGENT THREAT OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS AND HOMEGROWN TERROR

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

ONE HUNDRED FOURTEENTH CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION

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Committee on  
**HOMELAND SECURITY**  
Chairman Michael McCaul

*Opening Statement*

February 11, 2015

**Media Contact:** Lauren Claffey, April Ward  
(202) 226-8477

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**Statement of Chairman Michael McCaul (R-Texas)  
Committee on Homeland Security**

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

**Remarks as Delivered**

Today, at the first hearing of the House Committee on Homeland Security in the 114th Congress, I’d like to take a moment of silence to remember all those who lost their lives at the hands of ISIS, especially Americans James Foley, Steven Sotloff and, most recently, Kayla Mueller.

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The victims are the reason why we are here today. We must keep those barbaric terrorists out of the homeland to protect the American people. This hearing will also assess the urgent and growing threat of terrorists recruiting and inspiring Americans.

We need to accurately define the threat – violent Islamist extremism – and recognize it is spreading like wildfire around the globe. These fanatics want nothing less than destruction of our way of life, and now their ability to match words with deeds is growing at an astonishing rate. In recent years, their safe havens have proliferated and their ranks have swelled.

In many ways, we are no longer talking about terrorist groups. We are talking about terrorist armies. ISIS now controls a territory the size of Belgium, governs millions of people, draws on billions of dollars in revenue, and commands tens of thousands of foot soldiers. And they are brutal – their latest act of barbarism was on full display with the horrific murder of the Jordanian pilot.

This evolving Islamist terror landscape has given rise to the “dual threats” of foreign fighter returnees and homegrown terrorism. The recent terror attack in Paris, and other attacks and plots in Belgium, Germany, the U.K., Australia, Canada, and here in the U.S. are proof that the threat has surged and that the enemy is dead set on attacking the West.

As Mr. Rasmussen notes in his testimony, more than 20,000 fighters from over 90 countries have made their way to the battlefield to join al Qaeda, ISIS, and other extremist groups – making this the largest convergence of Islamist terrorists in world history. That number continues to grow despite months of airstrikes. Up to 5,000 of these fighters are Westerners, many of whom are able to travel into the United States without obtaining a visa. More than 150 American citizens have attempted to or succeeded in getting to the battlefield—and we know some have already returned to our shores.

But extremists do not need to travel overseas in order to become a threat to our homeland. Through Hollywood-like propaganda videos and social media, Islamist terror groups are inciting their followers and potential recruits to wage war at home. Both ISIS and Yemen-based al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula have called for Westerners – including Americans – to “wage individual jihad” in their home countries – and it’s working. ISIS social media also gives step-by-step instructions on how to get to the fight and how to return.

Following the attacks in Paris last month, our European partners have been busy uncovering new terrorist cells and disrupting imminent plots. Also, just recently here at home, the FBI arrested an Ohio-based ISIS sympathizer who was intending to attack the U.S. Capitol with pipe bombs.

I am worried about our ability to combat this threat abroad, but also here at home. I wrote to the president recently and raised concerns that we still have no lead agency in charge of countering domestic radicalization and no line item for it in the budgets of key departments and agencies. I am also concerned that the few programs we do have in place are far too small to confront a threat that has grown so quickly.

Today, I hope to hear how the administration assesses the danger posed by foreign fighters, particularly Westerners, and the threat of homegrown terrorism here in the United States. More importantly, I hope we will hear about how the administration is responding—and plans to ramp up its response—to these challenges.

This morning I would like to welcome all of our witnesses but especially Mr. Rasmussen. It is his first appearance before Congress after being confirmed as the Director of the NCTC, and we look forward to his testimony.

As part of our Committee’s focus on this critical national security issue, the Ranking Member and myself are establishing a Task Force on Combatting Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel. The six-month task force will review U.S. government efforts – focusing on DHS – to disrupt terrorist travel into

our country and to combat the foreign fighter threat. It will ultimately provide recommendations to the Committee on how we can improve U.S. security against these dangers.

I am very disappointed that the State Department chose not to send a witness here today. The threats we are discussing are serious, and the State Department plays a key role in combating them. I recently sent a letter to the White House expressing my concerns over the Department's desire to resettle tens of thousands of Syrian refugees in the United States. I am worried ISIS could exploit this effort in order to deploy operatives to America via a federally funded jihadi pipeline.

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**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**

**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.

**Hearing before the House Committee on Homeland Security  
“Countering Violent Islamist Extremism: The Urgent Threat of Foreign Fighters and  
Homegrown Terror”  
February 11, 2015**

**Nicholas J. Rasmussen  
Director  
National Counterterrorism Center**

Thank you Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, and members of the Committee. I appreciate this opportunity to be here today to discuss the threat posed by foreign fighters and homegrown terror, and our efforts to counter it. I'm pleased to join my colleagues and close partners from the Department of Homeland Security and Federal Bureau of Investigation.

**Foreign Fighters**

One of the most pressing concerns for the Intelligence Community is the ongoing flow of foreign fighters to Syria and the threat they could pose upon return to their home countries. The battlefields in Iraq and Syria provide foreign fighters with combat experience, weapons and explosives training, and access to terrorist networks that may be planning attacks which target the West.

This shared threat has prompted even closer cooperation across U.S. federal agencies and with our international partners, particularly in Europe. We are seeing increased international focus on this problem which is resulting in stricter counterterrorism laws overseas, increased border security efforts, and more willingness to share threat information among partner nations.

The United States and our allies are increasingly concerned with the more than 20,000 foreign fighters who have traveled to Syria from over 90 different countries. We assess at least 3,400 of these fighters are from Western countries including over 150 U.S. persons who have either traveled to the conflict zone, or attempted to do so. It's very difficult to be precise with these numbers because they come from a variety of sources that vary in quality. But the trend lines are clear and concerning. The rate of foreign fighter travel to Syria is unprecedented. It exceeds the rate of travelers who went to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen, or Somalia at any point in the last 20 years.

In addition to the foreign fighters who have already traveled, the number of those seeking to go to Syria and Iraq are going up. Furthermore, the majority of those getting there right now are fighting for ISIL on the battlefield in Syria and Iraq.

Individuals drawn to fight in foreign conflict zones do not fit any one stereotype. Recruits come from various backgrounds, highlighting the need for comprehensive messaging and early engagement with a variety of communities to dissuade vulnerable individuals from traveling. Extremist use of social media, especially by ISIL, is attracting a diverse set of aspiring

foreign fighters and serving as a platform for relaying travel advice, including facilitation information, meeting locations, and even regional hotel accommodations.

### **ISIL's Use of Social Media**

Last week, the world witnessed the brutal burning of Jordanian pilot Lieutenant Muath al-Kaseasbeh. As that propaganda video demonstrated, ISIL's media capabilities are robust and effective. Moreover, their ability to generate timely new propaganda continues to grow. Since January 1 of this year, more than 250 official ISIL products have been published online. The group has shown the capacity to use these products to speak to the full spectrum of potential audiences: local Sunni Arab populations whom they are trying to co-opt and exercise dominion over, coalition countries, and populations around the world—including English-speaking audiences here and across the globe.

As you would expect, ISIL uses the most popular social media platforms to disseminate this messaging – YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. And they know how to ensure that once their media releases are posted, that they reach wide and far almost instantaneously, with re-posting and generation of follow-on links and translations into additional languages.

In terms of content, we've all seen that it includes those horrible images in which hostages have been murdered or ISIL's adversaries on the battlefield have been executed.

But we've also seen the social media images of a bucolic, family-friendly, welcoming life under ISIL's rule in their self-declared caliphate, as ISIL tries to paint a picture to entice disenfranchised individuals seeking ideological, religious, and personal fulfillment, not just a battlefield or martyrdom experience.

ISIL also generates releases that cater to a younger population more familiar with popular culture. These releases often reference Western brands—including popular video games—to appeal to thrill seekers and youth looking for fulfillment. They have also coined pithy "memes" such as, "YODO: You Only Die Once. Why not make it martyrdom?"

ISIL supporters have also enhanced the group's presence on the internet, expressing their alliance in various languages—in countries from Belgium to the Philippines—in their "We are ISIL" campaign.

In short, ISIL has proven far more adept than core al-Qa'ida -- or any of al-Qa'ida's affiliates – at using new media tools to reach a broader audience.

### **Foreign Fighter Travel**

How do we disrupt travel by foreign fighters to conflict zones, Syria in particular? The volume and diversity of recruits flowing to and from the conflict areas make disruption especially challenging. There is no single pipeline for foreign fighter travel into and out of Syria. Violent extremists take different routes, including land, air, and sea. Most routes involve transit through Turkey because of its geographic proximity to the Syrian border areas where violent

extremist groups operate. Turkey has signed visa-free travel agreements with more than 69 governments, which limit the requirement for traveler screening. No visas are required for most EU citizens, some of whom are also able to travel on identity cards. Many would-be fighters simply take direct or indirect commercial flights to Turkish airports. Some European fighters also travel overland via the Balkans. Violent extremists from the Caucasus transit Iran, Russia, or Georgia en route to Turkey. Other extremists, including those from Europe or North Africa, use maritime routes by boarding cruise ships or ferries to Turkey before crossing into Syria.

Recently, Turkey has stepped up its efforts to deny entry to potential foreign fighters based on information provided by the fighters' countries of origin. The "Turkish Banned from Entry List" now reportedly includes 10,000 individuals.

In response to the recent attacks in Paris and arrests in several European countries of violent extremists planning terrorist attacks, we see an increased political willingness among our foreign partners to review and enhance border controls and institute stronger watchlisting and information sharing arrangements. In fact, tomorrow, the EU is holding a summit on foreign fighter issues, and we hope to see additional border security and information sharing initiatives as a result of this meeting. Additionally, the summit will most likely address counterterrorism legal mechanisms in the EU and a discussion of terrorist use of the Internet, all worthwhile and meaningful steps to greater cooperation in Europe.

Our partners in North Africa and Asia are also passing new counterterrorism laws and identifying other means to identify, interdict, and prosecute foreign fighters and those who support them. Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and the UAE have all recently enacted legislation or regulations to address the foreign fighter issue.

While good efforts are underway, significant work remains, particularly in ensuring that our foreign partners are able and willing to identify and stop foreign fighters at their borders—both to prevent fighters from entering and to stop fighters from leaving their home countries to travel abroad. These efforts must include a range of measures, including screening visa applicants; using Passenger Name Records or other data to identify potential foreign fighters; applying increased screening measures at points of departure; and a willingness to share information through INTERPOL, the UN, and bilateral relationships.

### **NCTC Efforts to Address Foreign Fighter Threat**

NCTC is undertaking a broad Center-wide effort to track foreign fighters traveling to Syria, working closely with our Intelligence Community partners. We work to resolve the identities of potential fighters to uncover possible derogatory information in NCTC holdings. Additionally, the U.S. Government continues to work closely with foreign partners to combat threats emanating from Syria.

As part of this effort, NCTC aggregates information on known or suspected terrorists traveling to Syria in the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment (TIDE). TIDE is the U.S. Government's central repository for terrorist identity intelligence. It is also an analytic tool, and this effort has created a valuable forum for identifying, tracking, and sharing information with

law enforcement, counterterrorism, screening, and watchlisting communities on known or suspected terrorists.

Our metrics-based tracking and assessment of these terrorist identities has directly helped resolve inconclusive identities, enhance TIDE records, and upgrade watchlist statuses on several hundred known or suspected terrorists.

NCTC's Pursuit Group -- which develops investigative leads for our partner agencies to pursue -- is working to identify foreign fighters entering Syria who have potential access or connections to the Homeland, so they can be watchlisted. This analysis leverages NCTC's unique accesses: a wider range of IC and law enforcement information than any other agency through our own counterterrorism data holdings as well as natively through embedded officers from ten other agencies.

### **Homegrown Violent Extremism**

The threat we face is not just from foreign fighters or terrorist groups including ISIL and al-Qa'ida. Individuals inspired by those and other groups, or simply by violent extremist propaganda, can be motivated to action, with little to no warning. Many of these so-called homegrown violent extremists (HVEs) are lone actors, who can potentially operate undetected and plan and execute a simple attack.

We closely monitor violent extremist activity, including when such activity occurs in the U.S., for signs that last year's attacks in Canada and New York may embolden other HVEs to conduct additional attacks. ISIL's rhetoric may have played a role in those attacks, particularly in target selection.

More broadly, we believe the HVE threat will remain at its current level resulting in fewer than 10 uncoordinated and unsophisticated plots annually from a pool of up to a few hundred individuals, most of whom are known to the IC and law enforcement.

### **Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)**

The growing number of individuals going abroad as foreign fighters to 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.

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 identify extremism in their midst and do something about it before it manifests itself in violence. NCTC, in direct collaboration with DHS, DOJ, and FBI, has led the creation of CVE tools to build community resilience across the country.

Working closely with these partners, NCTC is engaged in this work all across the country, and I will point to just one example.

You will recall the case last year in which three young teenage girls allegedly attempted to travel from Denver to Syria by way of Frankfurt, Germany, where their travel was disrupted.

In the aftermath of that incident, we, in concert with DOJ, DHS, and FBI, sent our officers on multiple occasions to meet with the greater Denver community and to raise awareness among community and law enforcement audiences about the terrorist recruitment threat. The briefing, developed with our partners, is now tailored to address the specific issue of foreign fighter recruitment in Syria and Iraq. We and our partner agencies have received a strong demand signal for more such outreach.

This isn't a law enforcement-oriented effort that might be perceived as intimidating. Rather, it's 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've had a remarkably positive reaction from the communities with whom we have engaged.

We continue to expand our CVE tools. With our DHS colleagues, we have created and regularly deliver the Community Resilience Exercise program, a table top exercise that brings together local law enforcement with community leadership in a city to run through a hypothetical scenario featuring a possible violent extremist or foreign fighter. We were pleased that House Homeland staff was able to attend a recent exercise in Minneapolis.

We realize we cannot institutionalize a prevention approach without scaling up these efforts. Our agency is creating programs to train individuals on CVE tools to ensure that communities across the country are able to lead on CVE approaches locally. This approach syncs with the efforts of the White House, NCTC, DHS, DOJ, and FBI to facilitate the local development and implementation of prevention and intervention frameworks in cities across the country.

## **Conclusion**

Confronting the threat of foreign fighters and working with resolve to prevent another terrorist attack remains the counterterrorism community's overriding mission. NCTC recently celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> year in service to the nation, and we remain focused on continuing to enhance our ability to counter the terrorist threat in the years ahead.

Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you this morning. I look forward to answering your questions.

UNCLASSIFIED



# Department of Justice

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**STATEMENT OF**

**MICHAEL STEINBACH  
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR  
FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION**

**BEFORE THE**

**COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**ENTITLED**

**“COUNTERING VIOLENT ISLAMIST EXTREMISM:  
THE URGENT THREAT OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS AND HOMEGROWN TERROR”**

**PRESENTED**

**FEBRUARY 11, 2015**

UNCLASSIFIED

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**Statement of Michael Steinbach  
Assistant Director  
Federal Bureau of Investigation**

**Before the  
Committee on Homeland Security  
United States House of Representatives**

**At a Hearing Entitled  
“Countering Violent Islamist Extremism:  
The Urgent Threat of Foreign Fighters and Homegrown Terror”**

**Presented  
February 11, 2015**

Good morning Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, and Members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the dynamic threat of foreign fighters traveling in support of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the rising threat to the United States from homegrown violent extremism. This threat remains one of the biggest priorities not only for the FBI but for the Intelligence Community (IC) as a whole and our foreign partners.

Conflicts in Syria and Iraq are currently the most attractive overseas theater for western-based extremists who want to engage in violence. We estimate upwards of 150 Americans have traveled or attempted to travel to Syria to join extremist groups. However, once in Syria, it is very difficult to discern what happens there. This lack of clarity remains troubling to the IC.

ISIL has proven to be relentless and continues to terrorize individuals in Syria and Iraq, including Westerners. We are concerned about the possibility of homegrown extremists becoming radicalized by information available on the internet. ISIL utilizes high-quality, traditional media platforms, as well as widespread social media campaigns, to propagate its extremist ideas. The group’s ability to produce visually appealing messaging coupled with the rampant use of social media by ISIL supporters exhibits the diverse propaganda capabilities. Combined, these tactics result in sophisticated propaganda which may continue to inspire individuals in the homeland to travel to fight overseas. Recent propaganda releases include multiple issues of English language publications, including a complete English magazine. Several videos of ISIL-held hostages and videos sensationalizing ISIL members have also been released.

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The threat to American interests overseas is most acute in Iraq, but extends throughout the Middle East region and to the West. There is little doubt that ISIL views the United States and the West as a strategic enemy. A year ago, the leader of ISIL warned the United States will soon be in direct conflict with the group. In January 2015, ISIL released a video via social media networking sites reiterating the group's encouragement of lone offender attacks in Western countries; specifically advocating for attacks against soldiers, patrons, law enforcement and intelligence members. Several incidents have occurred in the United States and Europe over the last few months that indicate this "call to arms" has resonated among ISIL supporters and sympathizers.

Our Western partners in Australia, Canada, France, and the United Kingdom (UK) have recently disrupted plotting and, unfortunately, had security officers attacked by individuals linked to ISIL or other forms of violent extremism. A French national who took hostages in Paris and shot and killed a policewoman in early January, claimed he was an ISIL supporter. In December 2014, another French national entered a police station in France and began stabbing police officers before being killed by police in a violent extremism attack. Two separate attacks in Canada in October 2014 targeted Canadian soldiers. Additionally, in September and October, the UK and Australian authorities separately thwarted attacks targeting local law enforcement. In each scenario, the apprehended individuals had suspected ties to ISIL.

The FBI remains concerned the recent calls by ISIL and its supporters on violent extremist web forums, and the recent events in Europe could continue to motivate homegrown extremists to conduct attacks in the homeland. Online supporters of ISIL have used various social media platforms to call for retaliation against the U.S. in the homeland. In one case, an Ohio-based man was arrested in January after he obtained a weapon and stated his intent to conduct an attack on the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Using a Twitter account, the individual posted statements, videos, and other content indicating support for ISIL, and he planned his attack based on this voiced support.

Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) continues to pose one of the greatest threats to the United States. AQAP's online English magazine *Inspire* advocates for lone wolves to conduct attacks against the homeland and Western targets by utilizing simple and inexpensive tactics and methods. The most recent edition of *Inspire* was released via social media sites in December 2014. As with the previous editions, the magazine promotes the need for lone wolves to carry out small arms attacks and provides specific, detailed "how to" instructions for constructing a successful bomb.

Historically, AQAP has been focused on large scale transportation and aviation plotting. However, last month's shooting at a satirical magazine's office in Paris demonstrates the sophisticated ability of individuals inspired or directed by AQAP to conduct coordinated attacks by combining small arms and explosive devices. The attackers demonstrated extensive preparation and maintained a level of discipline throughout the attack. This assault shows a new wave of extremism; a blending of homegrown violent extremism and an association with a foreign terrorist organization.

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Soon after the attacks in Paris, authorities in Belgium conducted a raid against several individuals who were allegedly planning an attack against police personnel. These individuals purportedly had ties to ISIL and allegedly had some connections to the Paris attackers. Our European partners remain on heightened alert and continue to take the steps necessary to mitigate imminent threats.

The recent events in Europe re-emphasize our need to remain vigilant in the homeland as these small scale attacks are feasible within the United States. Individuals inspired by foreign terrorist groups could be covertly arming themselves with expertise and tools to carry out an attack in the homeland. Community and world events may trigger one of these individuals to act. We remain concerned these types of events, which were widely broadcasted in the media, could inspire “copy cat” attacks. Additionally, as we saw after ISIL posted videos depicting beheadings of hostages, we continue to see intelligence advocating plots which include public or videotaped beheadings.

The FBI, in partnership with the Department of Homeland Security, is utilizing all investigative techniques and methods to combat the threat these individuals may pose to the United States. In conjunction with our domestic and foreign partners, we are rigorously collecting and analyzing intelligence information as it pertains to the ongoing threat posed by ISIL, AQAP, and other foreign terrorist organizations. In each of the FBI’s 56 Field Offices, the Joint Terrorism Task Forces remain vigilant to ensure the safety of the American public. Given the global impact of the Syria and Iraq conflicts, regular engagement with our domestic and foreign partners concerning foreign fighters is critical.

The FBI continues to pursue increased information sharing, efforts to combat radicalization, and exchanges regarding community outreach programs and policing strategies.

Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, and Committee Members, I thank you for this opportunity to testify concerning the threat foreign fighters and homegrown extremists pose to the homeland. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.