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# THE SPREAD OF ISIS AND TRANSNATIONAL TERRORISM

UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

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# ISIL as a Mass Movement

Prepared statement by

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Before the

Senate Foreign Relations Committee

*United States Senate*

Second Session, 114th Congress

## Hearing on the Spread of ISIS and Transnational Terrorism

The Islamic State has inspired immense fear among Americans and our allies. My main purpose today is to discuss the nature of the threat it poses, and to differentiate reasonable from unreasonable fear.

As a journalist, I have access to no information other than what is publicly available and what I can discover in my own investigation and conversations. Over the past two years, these conversations have included a small number of individuals broadly supportive of the Islamic State. None is currently in Islamic State territory, and their excuses for not having traveled there to fight range from the plausible (revoked passports, physical debility) to the unconvincing or lazy (“God has not given me the time”). They all know people who have immigrated, and in most cases, they agree openly with the Islamic State’s theology and politics. They recognize Abu Bakr al Baghdadi as the political successor to the Prophet Muhammad, and they adhere to a harsh, intolerant form of Islam practiced by a small minority of Muslims worldwide. My opinions derive also from close reading of the group’s official propaganda; its leaders’ statements; the open-source chatter of those who support ISIL; and conversations with others who watch the group closely, including Muslim and non-Muslim opponents and analysts.

I will begin with the reasonable fear. Supporters of ISIL have given me little reason to believe that their most brutal and intolerant statements are mere bravado or exaggeration for effect. It is true that they have welcomed my questions and treated me gently in person. In most cases, they seem to appreciate the comforts of the developed, peaceful countries where they live. But their conviction is real. When they talk about putting the Shia to the sword, or reinstating slavery and other practices inconsistent with modern notions of human rights, they do so without apology, and at times with evident gusto. Their opinions are thoroughly premeditated, and they are based in an

interpretation of scripture and Islamic history, as well as practical considerations. It would be folly to discount their sincerity or to interpret their beliefs as idle, ill-considered, or foolish. The fanaticism is real, and it does not reduce to other factors.

Second, the support for ISIL is broad as well as deep. The demographics of supporters skew toward the young and male, as in all wars. But the diversity of national origin, age, education, and class is staggering -- and it is not reflected in the cartoon version of the ISIL recruit that one gets from some journalistic accounts. That media composite has, in recent weeks, focused on the Belgian and French criminal-underworld gangsters who appear to have perpetrated the attacks in Brussels and Paris. I have little doubt that these types are well-represented. But also present in the fraternity of ISIL fighters are doctors, engineers, and a panoply of autodidacts in whose writing and speech any educated person can recognize kindred spirits. The group includes men well past peak battlefield age, as well as women of all ages in non-military roles.

Third, the numbers are large -- far greater than any Al Qaida's during its heyday. These numbers deserve a moment's contemplation. Whereas the forces under the command of Osama Bin Laden for the "core Al Qaida" attacks on Western targets likely numbered in the hundreds at their peak, *tens of thousands* of ISIL fighters have already immigrated to Syria and Iraq. The counterterrorism strategies that have kept the United States safe from Al Qaida have treated the group as a conspiracy. But ISIL is a *mass movement*, and it will be impossible to shut down plots against America or its allies entirely, using the same tools. Attacks will occur, and they will terrify Americans. What will increasingly define bravery and integrity among politicians will be their ability to manage the expectations of their constituents rather than to exploit their fears, and to react to these attacks with empathy and rationality simultaneously.

I come, then, to the topic of *unreasonable* fear. First, we should note the mismatch between the soaring ideological claims of ISIL and its practical capability. Its mode of expansion in Syria and Iraq, through fast movement of light-armored vehicles in familiar terrain, does not readily transfer into most other places, and would certainly fail in Turkey or heavily Kurdish or Shi'ite areas of Iraq. It requires desperate, beleaguered local populations, with some base willingness to contemplate a harsh revivalist Islamism as an alternative to the status quo. The ideology of ISIL echoes Nazism in its genocidal ambitions and tone, but it is not matched by an equally powerful war machine. The ISIL military is not one of the world's most formidable, and we should not mistake the grandeur of its language for vast operational capacity.

Second, the Islamic State still prioritizes building a caliphate and protecting its diminishing core territories -- not in attacking Western targets in spectacular ways, *a la* September 11. I make myself hostage to fortune by advancing this claim. But it remains correct, Brussels and Paris notwithstanding.

- ISIL's propaganda has not deviated from its early message: that the primary obligation of supporters overseas is to immigrate, and only if they fail to do so should they undertake solo terrorist efforts of their own. The propaganda does not leave doubt; it is difficult to consume much of it without reaching the conclusion that attacks on America are not the primary job of American ISIL supporters still at home. They should buy a plane ticket instead.

- Spectacular attacks on the West are instead the job of dedicated cells, directed from Syria and staffed at least in part by fighters who have returned to their home countries for that purpose. These cells are a conspiracy within the mass movement, a little touch of Al Qaida within the Islamic State. Journalists who have reported on the size of this conspiracy have estimated its European members in the dozens, some of whom are already captured or dead. These estimates are conservative, and I would not be surprised at total mobilized figures in triple digits.
- ISIL brags relentlessly in its propaganda about its control of territory. Its foreign attacks are calculated for maximum effect with minimum blowback. I suspect that central planning and control allows ISIL to titrate the strength of these attacks to avoid a response that would involve loss of core territory. The attacks are nevertheless spectacular enough to allow ISIL to dominate news cycles and remain first among global jihadi equals. A spectacular mass attack on the US would, I suspect, overshoot the mark.

None of the above points implies that ISIL will not attack the US and Europe; on the contrary, I assume they will. And the group's changing fortunes could easily alter its calculations and compel it to invest heavily in foreign operations, at the expense of local ones. However, when they do so, they will not mobilize their differentiating strength, which is their enormous numbers. Instead, they will be revisiting an Al Qaida strategy that we have begun to learn to counter.

Finally, although the conversion into a mass movement makes ISIL less fragile and harder to counter, it carries important dangers for ISIL as well. Mass movements resist central control, and they are vulnerable to changes of style, culture, and generational preference. ISIL has thrust itself into the consciousness of many, many Muslims, and has thereby suggested itself as an outlet for existential, political, and religious desires. It has no way of ensuring that next year's seekers will direct their energies toward the same ends. A sophisticated policy response to ISIL's rise will take into account not only military and political dimensions, but also countercultural, religious, and existential ones. Unfortunately, since government is typically at its most hapless when trying to deal with these types of issues, much work remains to be done -- much of it not by government but by civil society.



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## The Islamic State, Extremism, and the Spread of Transnational Terrorism<sup>1</sup>

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Testimony submitted to the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

April 12, 2016

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Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, distinguished members of the committee, it is an honor and privilege to appear before you today. This committee has held numerous hearings on the so-called Islamic State and the devastating impact of its barbarism on the Middle East. But coming on the heels of the Brussels bombings, and the group's demonstrated intent and capability to carry out terrorist attacks in the West, it is the spread of this transnational terrorism that I would like to address today.

Allow me to paint a picture: The office of the mayor of the Molenbeek municipality in Brussels sits alongside a picturesque, typically European cobblestone square. Across the square, within plain view of the municipal government, sits the family home of Salah Abdeslam, the Islamic State terrorist who was finally captured on March 18<sup>th</sup> after evading authorities since the November Paris attacks. Nothing separates the two buildings, but they are a world apart.

This is the bifurcated Brussels I saw when, coincidentally, I was in Belgium a few days before the terrorist attacks that killed 31 people and wounded hundreds. I was there to meet with senior counterterrorism, intelligence and law enforcement officials, as well as with local officials in the troubled municipality of Molenbeek, the subsection of Brussels where Abdeslam grew up and

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this testimony first appeared as "The Islamic State's Lone Wolf Era is Over," *Foreign Policy*, March 24, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/24/the-islamic-states-lone-wolf-era-is-over/> and as "My Journey through Brussels' Terrorist Safe Haven," *Politico*, March 27, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/03/brussels-attacks-terrorist-safe-haven-213768>. My thanks to both publications for allowing me to work through these ideas on their pages, and for providing formal permission allowing me to use portions of that material here.

which even Molenbeek's mayor, Francois Schepmans, describes as "a breeding ground for violence."<sup>2</sup>

### ***Expansion of the Islamic State Terrorist Threat to the West***

The Brussels bombings have made it plain that the scale of the threat posed by the Islamic State to the West is far larger than most Westerners had previously thought. That threat is no longer limited to the radicalization of the 5,000-6,000 European citizens who left the comfort and safety of their homes to fight alongside the Islamic State in Syria, Iraq and, more recently, Libya.<sup>3</sup> Nor has it only expanded to include so-called “lone-wolf” plots — self-organized attacks carried out by homegrown radicals. The Brussels bombings have made it painfully clear that the Islamic State is determined to plan and direct attacks in the West that are far more sophisticated and lethal than such small-scale mayhem.

It would be understandable if the public expressed anxiety and dismay about this metastasized danger. But the West’s counterterrorism officials are not entitled to feel surprise. For anyone paying close enough attention, the Islamic State’s expanded capabilities have been evident for well over a year.

After the U.S.-led coalition began launching airstrikes against Islamic State targets in August 2014, the group’s spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, responded with a call for supporters to carry out lone-offender terrorist attacks targeting the West.

If you can kill a disbelieving American or European — especially the spiteful and filthy French — or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war, including the citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah, and kill him in any manner or way however it may be.<sup>4</sup>

Since then, Islamic State supporters and sympathizers have tried to answer his call. The January 2015 attacks in Paris on the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and a kosher grocery store caused some confusion because some operatives appeared to be tied to al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), while others were inspired by the Islamic State. Looking back, however, it appears that these terrorist “frenemies” (the groups they respectively affiliated themselves with were fighting one another in a jihadi civil war back in Syria) were still part of the lone-offender phenomenon. They may have been inspired by groups based in the Middle East, but they were not directed by them.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert-Jan Bartunek and Alastair Macdonald, “Guns, God and grievances - Belgium's Islamist 'airbase',” *Reuters*, November 16, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-shooting-belgium-guns-insight-idUSKCN0T504J20151116>

<sup>3</sup> “State of play on implementation of the statement of the Members of the European Council of 12 February 2015, the JHA Council Conclusions of 20 November 2015, and the Conclusions of the European Council of 18 December 2015,” EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, Council of the European Union, March 1, 2016, <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2016/mar/eu-council-c-t-coordinator-report-6450-16.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> “The Failed Crusade,” *Dabiq*, Issue 4, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/the-islamic-state-e2809cdc481biq-magazine-422.pdf>

Lost in the shuffle after the horror of those attacks was the critical turning point in Islamic State terrorism in Europe: the plots that were averted by raids in Verviers, Belgium, a week after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack. These raids were a watershed moment for European counterterrorism officials, and Belgian authorities in particular, who were acting on information that the cell was plotting imminent and large-scale attacks in Belgium.<sup>5</sup> Police discovered automatic firearms, precursors for the explosive triacetone triperoxide (TATP), a body camera, multiple cell phones, handheld radios, police uniforms, fraudulent identification documents, and a large quantity of cash during the raid.<sup>6</sup> Information from European and Middle Eastern intelligence services indicated the raids thwarted “major terrorist attacks,” most likely in Belgium, though the investigation into the group’s activities spanned several European countries, including France, Greece, Spain, and the Netherlands.<sup>7</sup> The leader of the plot, Belgian citizen Abdelhamid Abaaoud, directed the operation from a safe house in Athens, Greece, using a cell phone, while other group members operated in several other European countries, investigators determined. “Items recovered during searches of residences affiliated with the cell suggest the group’s plotting may have included the use of small arms, improvised explosive devices, and the impersonation of police officers,” according to an intelligence assessment by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.<sup>8</sup>

Authorities quickly began to appreciate that the threat facing Europe was no longer limited to lone offenders inspired by the group. It now included trained and experienced foreign terrorist fighters coordinating attacks, directed by the Islamic State, across multiple jurisdictions. In the aftermath of the Verviers raid 13 arrests were made in Belgium, two in France, and one arrest was made in Greece, linked to a safe house in Athens. According to the same DHS intelligence assessment, the members of the cell were able to communicate and travel unimpeded across borders to facilitate attack planning.<sup>9</sup>

Authorities quickly honed in on the ringleader of the Belgium plots, Abaaoud, also known as Abu Umar al-Baljiki. But despite a Europe-wide manhunt, Abaaoud managed to elude authorities, escaping from Belgium to Syria, and then back. He later bragged about his escape in an interview with *Dabiq*, the Islamic State’s propaganda magazine: “My name and picture were

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<sup>5</sup> James Kanter, “2 Suspects Killed in Gun battle in Belgian Antiterror Raid,” *New York Times*, January 15, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/16/world/europe/police-raid-belgium.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/16/world/europe/police-raid-belgium.html?_r=1)

<sup>6</sup> “Future ISIL Operations in the West Could Resemble Disrupted Belgian Plot,” Department of Homeland Security Intelligence Assessment, May 13, 2015, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/DHS-FutureOperationsISIL.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Paul Cruickshank, [Mariano Castillo](#) and [Catherine E. Shoichet](#) “Belgian operation thwarted 'major terrorist attacks,' kills 2 suspects,” January 15, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/15/world/belgium-anti-terror-operation/>; “Future ISIL Operations in the West Could Resemble Disrupted Belgian Plot,” Department of Homeland Security Intelligence Assessment, May 13, 2015, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/DHS-FutureOperationsISIL.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> “Future ISIL Operations in the West Could Resemble Disrupted Belgian Plot,” Department of Homeland Security Intelligence Assessment, May 13, 2015, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/DHS-FutureOperationsISIL.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> “Future ISIL Operations in the West Could Resemble Disrupted Belgian Plot,” Department of Homeland Security Intelligence Assessment, May 13, 2015, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/DHS-FutureOperationsISIL.pdf>

all over the news yet I was able to stay in their homeland, plan operations against them, and leave safely when doing so became necessary.”<sup>10</sup>

The threat to Europe slowly became clearer still. In April 2015, French authorities arrested an Islamic State operative who had called for medical assistance after accidentally shooting himself. In his apartment, authorities found weapons, ammunition, and notes on potential targets, including churches, which he had been told to do by someone inside Syria, according to Paris prosecutor François Molins.<sup>11</sup> A U.S. intelligence bulletin reported the Islamic State operative had links to Abaaoud and had previously expressed interest in traveling to Syria.<sup>12</sup>

By May 2015, U.S. law enforcement concluded that a sea change had decisively occurred in the nature of the Islamic State terrorist threat. While threats remain from Islamic State-inspired lone offenders, the U.S. intelligence assessment concluded that future Islamic State operations would resemble the elaborate disrupted Verviers plot.<sup>13</sup>

The plot disrupted by Belgian authorities in January 2015 is the first instance in which a large group of terrorists possibly operating under ISIL direction has been discovered and may indicate the group has developed the capability to launch more complex operations in the West. We differentiate the complex, centrally planned plotting in Belgium from other, more-simplistic attacks by ISIL-inspired or directed individuals, which could occur with little to no warning.

The multi-jurisdictional nature of that plot cemented for European and U.S. counterterrorism officials the importance of information sharing across national agencies, but implementing the necessary reforms would be slow in coming.

The pace of the Islamic State’s foreign-directed plots sped up in the summer of 2015. In mid-August, a man was arrested while attempting to carry out an attack on a concert in France. The man, who had only recently returned from a six-day trip to Syria, told police he was ordered to carry out the attack by a man fitting Abaaoud’s description. Later that month, off-duty U.S. servicemen managed to subdue a gunman attempting to carry out an attack on a Thalys train traveling from Amsterdam to Paris.

Luck ran out when terrorists struck Paris on Nov. 13, 2015. These multiple coordinated attacks marked a departure from past Islamic State plots in the level of training and degree of operational

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<sup>10</sup> “From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grayzone,” *Dabiq*, Issue 7,

<https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/the-islamic-state-e2809cdc481biq-magazine-722.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> “France police arrest man ‘planning to attack churches,’” *BBC*, April 22, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32409253>; Tony Todd, “‘Syrian accomplice’ told Paris suspect to attack churches,” *France 24*, April 23, 2015, <http://www.france24.com/en/20150422-paris-terror-IS-al-qaeda-church-attack-syrian-accomplice>

<sup>12</sup> “Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures Used in the 13 November 2015 Paris Attacks,” DHS, FBI, NCTC Joint Intelligence Bulletin, November 23, 2015, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/DHS-FBI-NCTC-ParisAttacks.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> “Future ISIL Operations in the West Could Resemble Disrupted Belgian Plot,” Department of Homeland Security Intelligence Assessment, May 13, 2015, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/DHS-FutureOperationsISIL.pdf>

security executed by the attackers. According to the U.S. intelligence bulletin, using an acronym for the Islamic State, the November Paris attacks “demonstrated a greater degree of coordination and use of multiple tactics, resulting in higher casualties than has been seen in any previous ISIL Western attack.”<sup>14</sup> The tactics, techniques, and procedures used in the attacks were quickly identified by law enforcement as the type of attacks the West should be expecting from now on.

According to the latest EUROPOL counterterrorism report, the Paris attacks and subsequent investigations demonstrate a shift by the Islamic State toward “going global” in its terrorism campaign. The Islamic State has developed an “external action command,” EUROPOL notes, which “trained for special forces style attacks in the international environment.” The police organization’s warning for Europe was stark: “There is every reason to expect that [the Islamic State], [Islamic State-]inspired terrorists or another religiously inspired terrorist group will undertake a terrorist attack somewhere in Europe again, but particularly in France, intended to cause mass casualties amongst the civilian population.”<sup>15</sup>

If the evolution of the Islamic State threat to Europe was not yet perfectly clear after the Paris attacks, it has become so in the wake of the Brussels bombings. And yet, while Europe is now fully aware of the scope of the threat, it remains unprepared to cope with it. This includes both shortcomings in the counterterrorism capabilities of European states, as well as their efforts to integrate immigrant communities into the larger European societies in which they live.

The counterterrorism challenges were underscored by the inability of security services to find Salah Abdeslam for some four months after the November Paris attacks. More broadly, the latest report by the European Union’s counterterrorism coordinator revealed that not all member states have established electronic connections to Interpol at their border crossings.<sup>16</sup> The report was uncharacteristically blunt, finding that “information sharing still does not reflect the threat.”<sup>17</sup> In one glaring example, Europol’s Focal Point Travellers database has recorded only 2,786 verified foreign terrorist fighters despite “well-founded estimates that around 5,000 EU citizens have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join ISIL and other extremist groups,” the report said. Worse still, more than 90 percent of the reports of verified foreign terrorist fighters came from just five member states.

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<sup>14</sup> “Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures Used in the 13 November 2015 Paris Attacks,” DHS, FBI, NCTC Joint Intelligence Bulletin, November 23, 2015, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/DHS-FBI-NCTC-ParisAttacks.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> “Changes in modus operandi of Islamic State terrorist attacks,” Europol, January 18, 2016, [https://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/changes\\_in\\_modus\\_operandi\\_of\\_is\\_in\\_terrorist\\_attacks.pdf](https://www.europol.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/changes_in_modus_operandi_of_is_in_terrorist_attacks.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> “State of play on implementation of the statement of the Members of the European Council of 12 February 2015, the JHA Council Conclusions of 20 November 2015, and the Conclusions of the European Council of 18 December 2015,” EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, Council of the European Union, March 1, 2016, <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2016/mar/eu-council-c-t-coordinator-report-6450-16.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> “State of play on implementation of the statement of the Members of the European Council of 12 February 2015, the JHA Council Conclusions of 20 November 2015, and the Conclusions of the European Council of 18 December 2015,” EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, Council of the European Union, March 1, 2016, <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2016/mar/eu-council-c-t-coordinator-report-6450-16.pdf>

But the social integration challenges are more daunting still. In Belgium in particular, governance is complicated by the extremely federal system of government, divided not only across local, regional, and federal levels of government, but also by geography, language, and culture. But across Europe, solving the long ignored problem of disenfranchised immigrant communities is going to take more time and money, both of which are in short supply.

And these two sets of challenges — counterterrorism and intelligence on the one hand, and social and economic integration on the other — are intricately interconnected. The economic factors are not a primary factor of radicalization, Belgian officials told me, but they are a powerful reinforcing factor feeding an identity crisis centered on lack of opportunity, broken families, psychological fragility, and cultural and religious tension. With an unemployment rate as high as 30 percent, it should not be surprising that the vast majority of Belgian recruits to the Islamic State are small-time criminals.<sup>18</sup> One Molenbeek recruiter, who is now in jail, approached local youth in the neighborhood's ubiquitous storefront mosques and convinced them to donate some of the proceeds of their petty crime to fund the travel of foreign fighters to Syria.<sup>19</sup>

Today's petty criminals are now tomorrow's potential suicide bombers. And they will not be carrying out their attacks in faraway war zones but rather in the heart of the countries in which they grew up. The U.S. intelligence assessment written after the November Paris attacks presciently warned that "the involvement of a large number of operatives and group leaders based in multiple countries in future ISIL-linked plotting could create significant obstacles in the detection and disruption of preoperational activities."<sup>20</sup> That is certainly the case, but it is only half the problem. The still greater challenge European countries now face is contending with the European Islamic State terrorists being groomed today within their own borders.

### ***Fast Track from Zero to Hero***

The harsh fact is that communities ripe for radicalization exist across Europe—including in the heart of the capital of the European Union—and no one quite knows what to do about it. The day of my visit to Molenbeek I first rode a few quick stops on the Brussels metro from my hotel in the EU district to Molenbeek, where I met the mayor at her office together with police chiefs, members of the local police department's "counter-radicalization cell" and civilian "prevention officers" who had just concluded their weekly status-check on the local government's counter-radicalization, and social integration efforts. Their goal seems Sisyphean: reintegrating returning foreign terrorist fighters back into society and preventing still more disenfranchised Muslim youth from looking to the Islamic State for purpose and belonging.

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<sup>18</sup> Valentina Pop, "Islamic State Terror Cell Found Refuge in Brussels District," *Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-terror-cell-found-refuge-in-brussels-district-1458694455>

<sup>19</sup> Matthew Dalton, "Attacks Highlight Belgian Failure to Roll Up Extremist Network," *Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/attacks-highlight-belgian-failure-to-roll-up-extremist-network-1458694796>

<sup>20</sup> "Future ISIL Operations in the West Could Resemble Disrupted Belgian Plot," Department of Homeland Security Intelligence Assessment, May 13, 2015, <https://info.publicintelligence.net/DHS-FutureOperationsISIL.pdf>

The problem: Molenbeek is like another world, another culture, festering in the heart of the West. Only eight of 114 imams in Brussels speak any of the local languages. The majority Muslim municipality of about 100,000 people is the second poorest in the country, with the second youngest population, high unemployment and crime rates, and a nearly 10% annual population turnover that makes it a highly transient community. By some accounts, nearly a third of Molenbeek residents are unemployed.<sup>21</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Molenbeek has become an almost ideal recruiting ground for the Islamic State, and Belgium has the highest number per capita of Western foreign fighters who have traveled to join the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (and, more recently, Libya). And the majority of these came from Brussels, and Molenbeek in particular, according to Interior Minister Jan Jambon. The local municipality has been described as one of a few Islamic State “hotbeds of recruitment” around the world.<sup>22</sup> In the words of Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel, “Almost every time, there is a link to Molenbeek.” This week’s bombings were no exception.<sup>23</sup>

Recruiters offer a sense of family to people from broken homes; of belonging to people who feel disenfranchised from society; of empowerment to people who feel discriminated against; and of a higher calling and purpose to people who feel adrift. Recruiters pitch small groups of friends and family together: “You don’t really belong here. You are not wanted here. You can’t live here. You can’t get a job here.” Only then comes the religious extremist part: “Clearly, you should not be living among the infidels.”

What Islamic State offers them, in a nutshell, is a fast track from zero to hero.

Mix in a gangster culture and you have a combustible combination. In ghettoized neighborhoods like Molenbeek, today's criminals are tomorrow’s terrorists, and the radicalization process is in hyperdrive. As a result, “these guys are not stereotypical Islamists. They gamble, drink, do drugs. They are lady killers, wear Armani, fashionable haircuts. And they live off crime,” according to an article published by Pro Publica.<sup>24</sup> Time and again, it turns out the local police were aware of suspects like Abdeslam, but only as small-time thieves. “We knew of several Paris-related suspects before,” a police officer told me as I sat down with the mayor, “but not for terrorism reasons, just petty crime and small incidents.”

The mayor quickly chimed in, determined to be clear that I understood there was no way to know these crooks had suddenly become terrorists, adding “there was no suspicion of radicalization.”

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<sup>21</sup> Valentina Pop, “Islamic State Terror Cell Found Refuge in Brussels District,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-terror-cell-found-refuge-in-brussels-district-1458694455>

<sup>22</sup> “Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq,” The Soufan Group, December 2015, [http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG\\_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf](http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> Robert-Jan Bartunek and Alastair Macdonald, “Guns, God and grievances - Belgium's Islamist 'airbase',” *Reuters*, November 16, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-shooting-belgium-guns-insight-idUSKCN0T504J20151116>

<sup>24</sup> Sebastian Rotella, “Belgium’s Deadly Circles of Terror,” *ProPublica*, March 22, 2016, <https://www.propublica.org/article/belgiums-deadly-circles-of-terror>

But there is one other common thread that runs through all these cases: “The people who leave [for Syria and Iraq] today are all attracted to violence,” mayor Schepmans said. Dutch officials echo this sentiment, noting in a recent study that “everyone who has travelled since 2014 to the area under [the Islamic State’s] control will have seen the propaganda images of atrocities against ‘non-believers’.”<sup>25</sup> They know what they are getting into.

And while there is a component of religious extremism, Belgian officials stress, it is only skin deep. The suspects appear to be mainly criminals who are attracted to something that gives them identity and a sense of empowerment. They are radicalized to the idea of the Islamic state far more than to Islam. “Salafism [a radical Islamist ideology] is mainstream in Belgium,” was a refrain I heard from several of the officials I met. “Not all Salafists are terrorists,” they stressed, “but all our terrorists were targeted for recruitment by Salafists in these neighborhood extremist networks.”

### *Syrian Civil War, Islamic State, and Radicalization in Hyper Drive*

It is important to consider as context how the war in Syria transformed the nature of radicalization and recruitment of foreign terrorist fighters for the Islamic State (and, indeed, for other Islamist violent extremist groups). Initially, before the Islamic State existed, foreigners traveled to fight in Syria to defend fellow Sunni civilians and defend communities against persecution by the Assad regime. That was a much easier and faster radicalization process than had been the case under al-Qaeda. A person only had to be convinced to fight a defensive battle to protect Sunni civilians from the gas attacks, barrel bombings and starvation campaigns of the Assad regime, not an al-Qaeda-style offensive Jihad against the West.

As the conflict dragged on more people began to fight with the Jabhat al-Nusra’s and Ahrar al-Sham’s of the world because these more radical groups enjoyed greater financial support and therefore had access to more money and better weapons. Over time, many people who went to fight in Syria for altruistic reasons became increasingly radicalized by exposure to these more extreme groups. Some would later join the Islamic State.

The creation of the Islamic State and its so-called caliphate further fueled the pace of radicalization. For many vulnerable, at-risk Muslim men and women in Europe, the Islamic State provided the opportunity to be a part of building something exciting and important. They were being invited to get in on the early building stages of reestablishing a caliphate, just like the early followers of the Prophet Muhammad, making them part of something historic and bigger than themselves.

The Islamic State simplifies world conflicts into black and white “which allows someone the opportunity of being the ‘hero’ - an empowering narrative for a disenfranchised, disengaged

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<sup>25</sup> “Life with ISIS: the Myth Unraveled,” *General Intelligence and Security Service*, Ministry of the interior and Kingdom Relations, January 18, 2016, <https://english.aivd.nl/publications/publications/2016/01/15/publication-life-with-isis-the-myth-unravelled>

individual."<sup>26</sup> And while the Syrian civil war and then the founding of a so-called caliphate significantly sped up the pace of the radicalization process, there is today a powerful undercurrent that draws in at-risk youth having less to do with Islam or Assad but with providing “the thrill of being part of something bigger. It is a youth subculture ... and peer groups play a big role.”<sup>27</sup>

After the Paris attacks in November, Belgian Police intercepted a phone call to Brussels from Syria and overheard a Belgian militant inquiring about his friend Bilal Hadfi, who had been a suicide bomber in Paris. The militant asked what his friends were saying about Bilal back in the “sector,” a reference to Molenbeek where many of the Paris attackers grew up. “Are they talking about him? Are they praising him? Are they saying he was a lion?” the militant asked. His particular interest in his peer’s opinion of Hadfi made one thing perfectly clear: for him and others like him the Islamic State was more about personal glory than anything else.

### ***The Road Ahead***

When I met with the mayor of Molenbeek, she was frank about the task ahead in getting a handle on radicalization in the municipality but was equally blunt in describing the area as a victim of lack of government attention and investment. There is also confusion at the government level about how to handle the problem. Municipal authorities stressed that actual counterterrorism is the job of the Federal Police, who maintain a consolidated list of some 670 terrorist suspects, including people who have gone to fight in Syria and Iraq (and, more recently, Libya), returning foreign fighters, and individuals who seem inclined to become foreign terrorist fighters. A separate federal list focuses on priority criminal cases (due to the increasingly common links between the two, authorities plan to merge the two lists). According to local officials, the municipality has documented at least 85 cases of people who have been radicalized to terrorism, some of whom have left to join the Islamic State in Syria and others who have returned.<sup>28</sup>

Following the Brussels bombings, authorities are laser-focused not only on finding all the perpetrators and their accomplices, but mapping out the network of Islamic State terrorists on the ground in Belgium. That will be no small task, but even that kind of counterterrorism success will only go so far towards reestablishing a sense of security in Belgium in particular and Europe more generally. Hardening targets, implementing greater border security measures, and enhancing intelligence collection and information sharing are critical and still subpar, but these tools will only help us contend with yesterday’s threat; they won’t help us get ahead of tomorrow’s.

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<sup>26</sup> Danica Kirka, “ISIS is luring normal Western women with troubling simplicity,” *Business Insider*, May 28, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/young-women-are-joining-isis-for-more-than-marriage-2015-5>

<sup>27</sup> Jason Burke, “The story of a radicalisation: ‘I was not thinking my thoughts. I was not myself,’” *The Guardian*, November 26, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/26/radicalisation-islam-isis-maysa-not-thinking-my-thoughts-not-myself>

<sup>28</sup> Valentina Pop, “Islamic State Terror Cell Found Refuge in Brussels District,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-terror-cell-found-refuge-in-brussels-district-1458694455>

The good news is that Belgian authorities have now realized the need to build a prevention program. And to be fair, that realization came not last week but 15 months ago, when Belgian authorities raided a residence in Verviers a week after the Charlie Hebdo attack. The raids thwarted "major terrorist attacks" in Belgium and led to the intensification of "Plan R"—the government's national counter-radicalization plan. The plan predated the Verviers raid, on paper, but it has now led to tangible changes. A Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis (CUTA) serves as a fusion center between federal level national security agencies and local police departments. Nearly 18,000 police officers have been trained to spot potential radicalization identifiers under the Community Policing to Prevent Radicalization (COPRA) initiative. And the Federal Police have instituted a "grasping approach" to radicalization cases in which police are instructed to "follow up and don't let go" until there is no longer any threat the person in question is being radicalized to violence.

In the months before the Brussels bombings, local officials also developed "Plan Molenbeek" to address what they described to me as "the need for proper institutions to address the unique issues facing the municipality." They remain desperately understaffed, but they have already trained 700 community field workers (including teachers and social workers) to spot signs of radicalization and partner with prevention officers to develop a customized intervention for each case. They meet with counterparts in other municipalities facing similar issues to share lessons learned. This is especially important, one official told me, since "we are all learning by doing."

Still, since the November Paris attacks, tracking cases of people on the road to radicalization has only gotten harder. "Paris was a game-changer," a local police officer in Molenbeek told me. "Since then it's been like a tsunami of information flowing in from all our partners, including concerned members of the community, federal agencies, and our own civilian prevention officers." Those prevention officers play a critical role as civilian employees of the municipality focused solely on integrating people into society, but they are severely understaffed. The local police also have a counter-radicalization cell, but they too lack resources. Even with a staffing boost after the November Paris attacks, the cell numbers only eight officers. "Most of the people we come across are youngsters, unemployed, and often involved in criminal activities," prevention officers told me. "We try to integrate people we see into society, that's the most important thing now, ideally." A police officer chimed in, "And we prosecute, as necessary."

Last month, as Belgian and French police officers prepared to raid a suspected Islamic State safe-house, I was sitting with a senior Belgian counterterrorism official at his downtown headquarters. As we discussed the Islamic State threat to Europe in general, and Belgium in particular—about five miles from the site of the raid, but a world apart—the disconnect between the scale of the threat and the preparedness of the response became starkly clear. The manhunt for Abdeslam focused the attention of Belgian counterterrorism officials. Another terrorist was

killed in a shootout at the raid that day, an Algerian whose body was found next to a rifle, ammunition, a book on Salafism, and an Islamic State flag.<sup>29</sup>

But police found clues pointing to Abdeslam, including his fingerprints. Three days later, police finally captured Abdeslam, who was being sheltered by family members in Molenbeek, the Brussels municipality where he grew up, not far from the family home. But as we now know, authorities barely questioned Abdeslam between the time of his arrest and the Brussels bombings. Moreover, Turkish authorities had warned Belgian and Dutch authorities about one of the Brussels bombers, who they had turned away at the border and were sending back to Europe as what they specifically described as a “foreign terrorist fighter.”

“We got him,” an official excitedly tweeted at the news of Abdeslam’s capture. In truth the job has just begun. But after meeting with officials in Molenbeek, I allowed myself to feel just a touch of optimism: the police and prevention officers I met in Molenbeek were among the most impressive I’ve met anywhere. “We are discovering on a daily basis new ways to work in the prevention space,” one of them commented as our meeting came to a close. The problem: What they need is in short supply: more resources and more time.

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<sup>29</sup> Greg Botelho, “Brussels shooting: ISIS flag, ammo found in raid tied to Paris attacks,” *CNN* March 16, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/03/16/europe/brussels-raid-paris-attack/>

## **Hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee**

### **The Spread of ISIS and Transnational Terrorism**

**April 12, 2016**

**Matthew G. Olsen**

**Former Director of the National Counterterrorism Center**

Thank you Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, and distinguished members of the Committee. I am honored to have this opportunity to appear before you to discuss the spread of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and the threat from transnational terrorism.

We meet this morning in the wake of the horrific attacks in Brussels last month and the recent attacks Paris and in San Bernardino late last year. These massacres serve both as a sobering reminder of the complexity of the threats we face from terrorist groups of global reach and as a call for action in the ongoing struggle against terrorism. Indeed, these attacks give this hearing added significance, as you convene to examine the threat to the United States and our interests around the world and the steps we should take to counter terrorist groups both at home and abroad.

By any measure, ISIS presents the most urgent threat to our security in the world today. The group has exploited the conflict in Syria and sectarian tensions in Iraq to entrench itself in both countries, now spanning the geographic center of the Middle East. Using both terrorist and insurgent tactics, the group has seized and is governing territory, while at the same time securing the allegiance of allied terrorist groups across the Middle East and North Africa. ISIS's sanctuary enables it to recruit, train, and execute external attacks, as we have now seen in Europe, and to incite assailants around the world. It has recruited thousands of militants to join its fight in the region and uses its propaganda campaign to radicalize countless others in the West. And at the same time, we continue to face an enduring threat from al Qaida and its affiliates, who maintain the intent and capacity to carry out attacks in the West.

In my remarks today, I will focus first on the nature of the terrorist threat from transnational terrorist groups, focusing on ISIS and al-Qaida. I then will address some of the key elements of the strategy to degrade and defeat these groups, as well as the challenges we face ahead.

#### **The Spread of ISIS**

Let me begin with the spread of ISIS from its roots in Iraq. ISIS traces its origin to the veteran Sunni terrorist, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, who founded the group in 2004 and pledged his allegiance to bin Laden. Al Qaeda in Iraq, as it was then known, targeted U.S. forces and civilians to pressure the United States and other countries to leave Iraq and gained a reputation for brutality and tyranny.

In 2007, the group's continued targeting and repression of Sunni civilians in Iraq caused a widespread backlash—often referred to as the Sunni Awakening—against the group. This coincided with a surge in U.S. and coalition forces and Iraq counterterrorism operations that ultimately denied ISIS safe haven and led to a sharp decrease in its attack tempo. Then in 2011, the group began to reconstitute itself amid growing Sunni discontent and the civil war in Syria. In 2012, ISIS conducted an average of 5-10 suicide attacks in Iraq per month, an attack tempo that grew to 30-40 attacks per month in 2013.

While gaining strength in Iraq, ISIS exploited the conflict and chaos in Syria to expand its operations across the border. The group established the al-Nusrah Front as a cover for its activities in Syria, and in April 2013, the group publicly declared its presence in Syria under the ISIS name. Al-Nusrah leaders immediately rejected ISIS's announcement and publicly pledged allegiance to al-Qaida. And by February 2014, al-Qaida declared that ISIS was no longer a branch of the group.

At the same time, ISIS accelerated its efforts to remove Iraqi and Syrian government control of key portions of their respective territories, seizing control of Raqqa, Syria, and Fallujah, Iraq, in January 2014. The group marched from its safe haven in Syria, across the border into northern Iraq, slaughtering thousands of Iraqi Muslims, Sunni and Shia alike, on its way to seizing Mosul in June 2014. Through these battlefield victories, the group gained weapons, equipment, and territory, as well as an extensive war chest. In the summer of 2014, ISIS declared the establishment of an Islamic caliphate under the name the "Islamic State" and called for all Muslims to pledge support to the group and its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Three overarching factors account for the rise and rapid success of ISIS over the past three years.

First, ISIS has exploited the civil war in Syria and the lack of security in northern Iraq to establish a safe haven. At the same time, Assad's brutal suppression of the Syrian people acted as a magnet for extremists and foreign fighters. In western Iraq, the withdrawal of security forces during the initial military engagements with ISIS left swaths of territory ungoverned. ISIS has used these areas to establish sanctuaries in Syria and Iraq from where the group could amass and coordinate fighters and resources with little interference. With virtually no security forces along the Iraq-Syria border, ISIS was able to move personnel and supplies with ease within its held territories.

Second, ISIS has proven to be an effective fighting force. Its battlefield strategy employs a mix of terrorist operations, hit-and-run tactics, and paramilitary assaults to enable the group's rapid gains. These battlefield advances, in turn, sparked other Sunni insurgents into action, and they have helped the group hold and administer territory. Disaffected Sunnis have had few alternatives in Iraq or Syria. The leadership in both countries has pushed them to the sidelines in the political process for years, failing to address their grievances. ISIS has been recruiting these young Sunnis to fight. Since September 2014, the U.S.-led military coalition has halted ISIS's momentum and

reversed the group's territorial gains, but ISIS has sought to adapt its tactics in the face of coalition air strikes.

Third, ISIS views itself as the new leader of the global jihad. The group has developed an unprecedented ability to communicate with its followers worldwide. It operates the most sophisticated propaganda machine of any terrorist group. ISIS disseminates timely, high-quality media content on multiple platforms, including on social media, designed to secure a widespread following for the group. ISIS uses a range of media to tout its military capabilities, executions of captured soldiers, and battlefield victories.

ISIS's media campaign also is aimed at drawing foreign fighters to the group, including many from Western countries. The media campaign also allows ISIS to recruit new fighters to conduct independent or inspired attacks in the West. ISIS's propaganda outlets include multiple websites, active Twitter feeds, YouTube channels, and online chat rooms. ISIS uses these platforms to radicalize and mobilize potential operatives in the United States and elsewhere. The group's supporters have sustained this momentum on social media by encouraging attacks in the United States and against U.S. interests in retaliation for our airstrikes. As a result, ISIS threatens to outpace al-Qaida as the dominant voice of influence in the global extremist movement.

### **The Threat from ISIS Today**

Today, ISIS reportedly has between 20,000 and 25,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria, an overall decrease from the number of fighters in 2014. ISIS controls much of the Tigris-Euphrates basin. Significantly, however, ISIS's frontlines in parts of northern and central Iraq and northern Syria have been pushed back, according to the Defense Department, and ISIS probably can no longer operate openly in approximately 25 to 30 percent of populated areas in Iraq and Syria that it dominated in August 2014.

ISIS also has branched out, taking advantage of the chaos and lack of security in countries like Yemen to Libya to expand to new territory and enlist new followers. ISIS can now claim formal alliances with eight affiliated groups across an arc of instability and unrest stretching from the Middle East across North Africa.

Libya is the most prominent example of the expansion of ISIS. There, ISIS's forces include as many as 6,500 fighters, who have captured the town of Sirte and 150-miles of coastline over the past year. This provides ISIS with a relatively safe base from which to attract new recruits and execute attacks elsewhere, including on Libya's oil facilities. In addition, ISIS has proven its ability to conduct operations in western Libya, including a suicide bombing at a police training, which killed at least 60 people earlier this year.

From this position, ISIS poses a multi-faceted threat to Europe and to the United States. The strategic goal of ISIS remains to establish an Islamic caliphate through armed conflict with governments it considers apostate—including European nations and the

United States. In early 2014, ISIS's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi warned that the United States will soon "be in direct conflict" with the group. In September 2014, the group's spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani released a speech instructing supporters to kill disbelievers in Western countries "in any manner or way," without traveling to Syria or waiting for direction.

ISIS has established an external operations organization under Adnani's leadership. This unit reportedly is a distinct body inside ISIS responsible for identifying recruits, supplying training and cash, and arranging for the delivery of weapons. The unit's main focus has been Europe, but it also has directed deadly attacks outside Europe, including in Turkey, Egypt, Tunisia and Lebanon.

A recent New York Times report attributes 1,200 deaths to ISIS outside Iraq and Syria, and about half of the dead have been local civilians in Arab countries, many killed in attacks on mosques and government offices. In the past two years ISIS reportedly has directed or inspired more than 80 external attacks in as many as 20 nations. And ISIS has carried out or inspired at least 29 deadly assaults targeting Westerners around the world, killing more than 650 people.

Most concerning, the recent attacks in Brussels and Paris demonstrate that ISIS now has both the intent and capability to direct and execute sophisticated attacks in Western Europe. These attacks reflect an alarming trend. Over the past year, ISIS has increased the complexity, severity, and pace of its external attacks. The Brussels and Paris attacks were not simply inspired by ISIS, but rather they were ISIS-planned and directed. And they were conducted as part of a coordinated effort to maximize casualties by striking some of the most vulnerable targets in the West: a train station and airport in Brussels, and a nightclub, cafe, and sporting arena in Paris. Further, recent reports that ISIS has used chemical weapons in Syria, and that it conducted surveillance of Belgium nuclear facilities, raise the specter that the group is intent on using weapons of mass destruction.

In the United States, the threat from ISIS is on a smaller scale but persistent. We have experienced attacks that ISIS has inspired—including the attacks in San Bernardino and in Garland, Texas—and there has been an overall uptick over the past year in the number of moderate-to-small scale plots. Lone actors or insular groups—often self-directed or inspired by overseas groups, like ISIS—pose the most serious threat to carry out attacks here. Homegrown violent extremists will likely continue gravitating to simpler plots that do not require advanced skills, outside training, or communication with others. The online environment serves a critical role in radicalizing and mobilizing homegrown extremists towards violence. Highlighting the challenge this presents, the FBI Director said last year that the FBI has homegrown violent extremist cases, totaling about 900, in every state. Most of these cases are connected to ISIS.

Several factors are driving this trend toward the increasing pace and scale of terrorist-related violence. First, the sheer number of number of Europeans and other Westerners who have gone to Syria to fight in the conflict and to join ISIS is supplying a

steady flow of operatives to the group. Reports indicate that more than 6,000 Europeans—including many French, German, British, and Belgian nationals—have travelled to Syria to join the fight. This is part of the total of approximately 40,000 foreign fighters in the region. Among the Europeans who have left for Syria, several hundred fighters have returned to their home countries, typically battle-hardened, trained, and further radicalized. The number of Americans who have travelled to Syria or Iraq, or have tried to, exceeds 250.

As such, we should not underestimate the potential of an ISIS-directed attack in the United States. While the principal threat from ISIS in the United States is from homegrown, ISIS-inspired actors, the fact that so many Americans have travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight, along with thousands more from visa waiver countries in Europe, raises the real concern that these individuals could be deployed here to conduct attacks similar to the attacks in Paris and Brussels.

Second, ISIS has developed more advanced tactics in planning and executing these attacks. In both Brussels and Paris, the operatives staged coordinated attacks at multiple sites, effectively hampering police responses. The militants exploited weaknesses in Europe's border controls in order to move relatively freely from Syria to France and Belgium. The group has also moved away from previous efforts to attack symbolically significant targets—such as the 2014 attack on a Jewish museum in Brussels—and appears to have adopted the guidance of a senior ISIS operative in the group's online magazine, who directed followers “to stop looking for specific targets” and to “hit everyone and everything.” Further, the explosives used in Paris and likely in Brussels indicate the terrorists have achieved a level of proficiency in bomb making. The use of TATP in Paris and the discovery of the material in raids in Brussels suggest that the operatives have received sophisticated explosives training, possibly in Syria

Third, existing networks of extremists in Europe are providing the infrastructure to support the execution of attacks there. The investigations of the Paris and Belgium attacks have revealed embedded radical networks that supply foreign fighters to ISIS in Syria and operatives and logistical support for the terrorist attacks in those cities. While such entrenched and isolated networks are not present in the United States, ISIS continues to target Americans for recruitment, including through the use of focused social media, in order to identify and mobilize operatives here.

Looking more broadly, the rise of ISIS should be viewed as a manifestation of the transformation of the global jihadist movement over the past several years. We have seen this movement diversify and expand in the aftermath of the upheaval and political chaos in the Arab world since 2010. Instability and unrest in large parts of the Middle East and North Africa have led to a lack of security, border control, and effective governance. In the last few years, four states—Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen—have effectively collapsed. ISIS and other terrorist groups exploit these conditions to expand their reach and establish safe havens. As a result, the threat now comes from a decentralized array of organizations and networks, with ISIS being the group that presents the most urgent threat today.

Specifically, Al-Qaida core continues to support attacking the West and is vying with ISIS to be the recognized leader of the global jihad. There is no doubt that sustained U.S. counterterrorism pressure has led to the steady elimination of al-Qaida's senior leaders and limited the group's ability to operate, train, and recruit operatives. At the same time, the core leadership of al-Qaida continues to wield substantial influence over affiliated and allied groups, such as Yemen-based al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula. On three occasions over the past several years, AQAP has sought to bring down an airliner bound for the United States. And there is reason to believe it still harbors the intent and substantial capability to carry out such a plot.

In Syria, veteran al-Qaida fighters have traveled from Pakistan to take advantage of the permissive operating environment and access to foreign fighters. They are focused on plotting against the West. Al-Shabaab also maintains a safe haven in Somalia and threatens U.S. interests in the region, asserting the aim of creating a caliphate across east Africa. The group has reportedly increased its recruitment in Kenya and aims to destabilize parts of Kenya. Finally, AQIM (and its splinter groups) and Boko Haram—now an official branch of ISIS—continue to maintain their base of operations in North and West Africa and have demonstrated sustained capabilities to carry out deadly attacks against civilian targets.

### **The Strategy To Defeat ISIS**

Against this backdrop, I will briefly address the current strategy to confront and ultimately defeat ISIS. As formidable as ISIS has become, the group is vulnerable. Indeed, the U.S.-led military campaign has killed thousands of ISIS fighters and rolled back ISIS's territorial gains in parts of Iraq and Syria. ISIS has not had any major strategic military victories in Iraq or Syria for almost a year. As ISIS loses its hold on territory, its claim that it has established the "caliphate" will be eroded, and the group will lose its central appeal.

On the military front, a coalition of twelve nations has conducted more than 8,700 airstrikes in Syria and Iraq, according to the Defense Department. These strikes have taken out a range of targets, including ISIS vehicles, weaponry, training camps, oil infrastructure, and artillery positions. In addition, several nations have joined the United States in deploying military personal to assist the Iraqi government, training more than 17,000 Iraqi security forces.

The military effort also has included the successful targeting of ISIS leaders. United States special operations forces have gone into Syria to support the fight against ISIS, bringing a unique set of capabilities, such as intelligence gathering, enabling local forces, and targeting high-value ISIS operatives and leaders.

From a counterterrorism perspective, the United States is pursuing multiple lines of effort. First, the United States is focusing on stemming the flow of foreign fighters to Syria, and disrupting ISIS's financial networks. The government reports that at least 50

countries plus the United Nations now contribute foreign terrorist fighter profiles to INTERPOL, and the United States has bilateral arrangements with 40 international partners for sharing terrorist travel information. In 2015, the U.S. government sanctioned more than 30 ISIS-linked senior leaders, financiers, foreign terrorist facilitators, and organizations, helping isolate ISIS from the international financial system. In addition, since 2014, the FBI has arrested approximately 65 individuals in ISIS-related criminal matters.

Second, to counter ISIS propaganda, the United States is strengthening its efforts to prevent ISIS from radicalizing and mobilizing recruits. The White House recently announced the creation of an interagency countering violent extremism (CVE) task force under the leadership of the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Justice, with additional staffing from the FBI and National Counterterrorism Center. The CVE task force is charged with the integrating whole-of-government programs and activities and establishing new CVE efforts. As part of this initiative, the DHS Office for Community Partnerships is developing innovative ways to support communities that seek to discourage violent extremism and to undercut terrorist narratives.

Third, and more broadly, the United States continues to lead the international diplomatic effort to resolve the underlying conflicts in the region. This includes working toward a negotiated political transition that removes Bashar al-Asad from power and ultimately leads to an inclusive government that is responsive to the needs of all Syrians. This effort also includes supporting the Iraqi government's progress toward effective and inclusive governance, stabilization efforts, and reconciliation.

To augment this strategy, there are a number of initiatives that merit consideration.

One is a surge in our intelligence capabilities. Such a surge should include enhancing our technical surveillance capabilities, providing additional resources for the development of sources to penetrate ISIS, and fostering closer relationships with intelligence services in the region. This focus on intelligence collection would help address the fact that our law enforcement and intelligence agencies have found it increasingly difficult to collect specific intelligence on terrorist intentions and plots. This intelligence gap is due in part to the widespread availability and adoption of encrypted communication technology. Indeed, ISIS has released a how-to manual to its followers on the use of encryption to avoid detection. The gap also is the result of the illegal disclosures of our intelligence collection methods and techniques. These disclosures have provided terrorists with a roadmap on how to evade our surveillance. Therefore, rebuilding our intelligence capabilities should be an imperative.

Next, the United States should continue to work in concert with European partners and support Europe's effort to break down barriers to information sharing among agencies and among nations and to strengthen border controls. Today, European nations do not always alert each other when they encounter a terrorism suspect at a border. Europe should incorporate the lessons we learned after 9/11 and adopt structural changes

that enable sharing of information between law enforcement and intelligence agencies and that support watchlisting of suspected terrorists.

Finally, the United States should redouble its efforts to counter ISIS on the ideological front. This begins with a recognition that the United States, along with nations in Europe, must build and maintain trust and strong relationships with Muslim communities who are on the front lines of the fight against radicalization. This also means we must reject unambiguously the hateful rhetoric that erodes that trust. The U.S. strategy should focus on empowering Muslim American communities to confront extremist ideology, working to galvanize and amplify networks of people, both in the government and private sector, to confront ISIS's ideology of oppression and violence. While the government has made strides in this direction, the pace and scale of the effort has not matched the threat.

## **Conclusion**

In the wake of the terrorist attacks in Europe and here in the United States, our continued focus on ISIS and transnational terrorist threats is absolutely warranted. We should not underestimate the capacity of ISIS and other groups to adapt and evade our defenses and to carry out acts of violence, both here at home and around the world.

But no terrorist group is invincible. The enduring lessons of 9/11 are that we can overcome and defeat the threat of terrorism through strength, unity, and adherence to our founding values, and that American leadership is indispensable to this fight.

I look forward to answering your questions.