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

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Opening

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 10th 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.

