



NYPD Shield Conference

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Remarks as Prepared



Introduction

Good Morning. It is great honor for me to be here in New York City and with you here today. I would like to begin by thanking Commissioner Bratton for inviting me.

Just yesterday, I paid my first visit to the 9/11 Memorial and Museum. You can't work on Counterterrorism issues and fail to be moved by the experience.

At the National Counterterrorism Center outside Washington, we have our own small area of remembrance. Each morning, our officers walk past pieces from the World Trade Center and the Pentagon as they begin their day working to prevent something like that from ever happening again.

As you know, we have come a long since way since 2001. I am privileged to lead the National Counterterrorism Center, an enterprise that grew out of the reforms suggested in the 9/11 Commission.

Simply put, NCTC brings people—and information—together in a way that did not happen September 10th. At NCTC, we sit in the middle of a Counterterrorism and Homeland Security enterprise that includes the federal government and all or our partners in Washington.

It includes state, local and municipal partners all across the country. And that enterprise includes partners in the business community, the private sector, and in those sectors that maintain our nation's critical infrastructure.

To support that effort, NCTC maintains a full time officer here in New York City. That person, Meghann, is one of the most talented and experienced terrorism analysts anywhere in government, and I would encourage you to get to know her.

It would be unfair to our predecessors to say that we work harder at the counterterrorism mission than we did 15 years ago. But I am pretty certain that we work smarter and more efficiently than we did back then.

We have learned so, so much about what we need to do to keep this country safe. And I would argue that we are working more closely and more cooperatively to carry about that mission than we ever have before.

Despite that decade of progress, we still face a formidable threat, icludign here in the Homeland. I spent much of last week on Capitol Hill talking about the evolution of terrorism, and—later this week—I'll talk about prevention efforts when the White House hosts its Summit on Countering Violent Extremism.

Before I begin to describe the terrorism landscape, I would like to thank each of you for your work. The Shield Program is partnership in action to protect our country. And that's what we aim to do every day at NCTC.





Strategic Assessment: The Global Terrorist Landscape in 2015

Today's terrorist threat environment is dynamic and dangerous, as are the wide array of terrorist actors driving it. They are located across a wide swath of Africa, Asia and the Middle East with the ability to reach into the West, and even the United States.

There seem to be more terrorist threats in more places than at any point in our past.

New groups have emerged in the wake of the Arab uprisings in 2011. Most are located in the Middle East and North Africa and are primarily focused on achieving local gains.

We have witnessed the rise of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) with its ambitious vision, quick territorial expansion, extreme violence and brutality, and innovative use of social media.

All this is happening, even as we assess that the leadership cadre of core al-Qa'ida – the group that planned and executed the 9/11 attacks – is at its weakest point since before those attacks over 13 years ago.

The increasingly fragmented and dispersed terrorism landscape suggests that we might be moving into an era in which centralized leadership of terrorist organizations matters less and group identity is more fluid, with personal connections and local agendas and grievances of terrorists mattering more than before.

I would argue that the scale—both in terms of quantity and quality—of threat we are facing in the U.S. and the West is different from the threat that we see in the countries and regions where many of these terrorist groups are located.

In the U.S. and West, we have reduced significantly the threat of a catastrophic 9/11-style attack due to consistent counterterrorism (CT) pressure that we, and our partners, have been able to bring to bear against some of the most dangerous and violent terrorist groups.

And clearly, sustaining that level of pressure will be essential to preventing the return of the higher-scale threats.

Recent actions by al-Qa'ida followers overseas underscore our continued concern regarding the potential of high-impact attacks, including the ability of terrorist groups and individual violent extremists to target Western aviation.

As you know, last summer the United States and United Kingdom implemented enhanced security measures at airports with direct flights to the United States, which included new rules aimed at screening personal electronic devices.





Undeterred by regular improvements and enhancements to security measures, terrorist groups continue to see commercial aviation as a desirable symbolic target, and these aspirations are not limited to al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula.

In addition to these persistent concerns over aviation security, we still face a range of moderate and small scale threats from a small, but persistent number of transnationally-oriented groups, including al-Qa'ida and some of its affiliates and allies.

These groups remain intent on striking the United States and are content to patiently develop their access and operational plans over multiple years.

But even as we maintain our focus on known terrorist groups, I would assess that we face a much greater recurring threat from lone offenders and loose networks of individuals.

Of the eleven attacks in the West since last May, ten were conducted by individual violent extremists. You are all too familiar with one of those attacks, last October when NYPD officers were attacked by an individual with a hatchet.

The majority of these lone offender attacks more closely resemble the size, scale, and sophistication of random acts of violence than they do the destructiveness of the organized and well-developed plots that we witnessed in the years after September 11, 2001.

In the West, these attacks have happened more frequently, yet thankfully resulted in relatively small numbers of casualties. And going forward, we expect that individuals and small networks will try to maintain and build upon this momentum and capitalize on the media coverage that these attacks generate.

In contrast, our allies and partners in Africa, Asia and the Middle East face a much different threat outlook than we are facing in the West.

In all of these regions, terrorists are conducting violent attacks on a much more frequent basis and at a larger scale than in the West. In the past year alone, we assess that there have been hundreds, of attacks in these regions, resulting in thousands of deaths.

Terrorists active in these regions are also contributing to population displacements that affect millions. Some are also responsible for stoking sectarian tensions and contributing to the proliferation of Sunni-Shia violence, particularly within Muslim-majority countries.

Many of the most ambitious terrorist groups are located in countries continuing to work through the effects of the Arab uprisings, including Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen. Others are active in countries undergoing insurgencies, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria, Somalia, and most of the countries previously mentioned.





The impact that terrorist violence is having in these countries and regions is, I would argue, far greater and more profound than it is in the West, and here inside the United States.

Having made a bit of a case that the threat looks different here at Home than it looks throughout most of the world, I will double back on that observation and highlight a phenomenon that actually links the threat picture over there and back here.

And that phenomenon is the greater than 20,000 foreign fighters from more than 90 countries who have traveled to Syria to fight since the conflict in Syria began over 3 years ago.

What we are seeing in terms of travelers going to Syria to fight far exceeds the rate of travelers who went into Afghanistan/Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen, or Somalia at any point in the last ten years.

And while the majority of foreign fighters have come from the Middle East and North Africa, it is also true that more than 3,400 westerners have traveled to join the fight against the Assad regime.

Within that pool of westerners, more than 150 U.S. persons from a variety of backgrounds and locations in the United States have traveled or attempted to travel to Syria. A handful of these U.S. persons have even died on the battlefield in Syria.

This foreign fighter problem is multi-faceted. It affects the shape of the battlefield in Syria and Iraq, and it raises significant threat concerns outside the region, once those fighters depart the conflict zone and return to their home countries.

We have already witnessed this phenomenon in Europe and in North Africa, and we are investing a large amount of resources in identifying and tracking individuals who fit into this foreign fighter category.

Threat to the Homeland

In terms of the Homeland threat we face, I would say that the increase in moderate-to-small scale attacks in the West since last summer by individual extremists reinforces our assessment that the most likely and immediate threat to the Homeland will come from Homegrown Violent Extremists (HVEs) or individuals with loose affiliation to terrorist groups overseas.

ISIL's rise during the past year and its adept exploitation of the media attention generated by the group's actions has created unprecedented opportunities for that particular group to reach potential recruits or influence those inspired by the group's message.

As my colleagues in FBI and NYPD can attest, we are closely monitoring for signs of homegrown violent extremists in the United States plotting attacks here, but this not at all an easy task.





In terms of tactics and techniques, we assess HVEs will likely continue gravitating to simpler plots that do not require advanced skills, outside training, or communication with others.

As you might expect, it is attacks such as these that are the most difficult to disrupt and anticipate through our traditional tools of intelligence and law enforcement.

The success of small arms attacks in France, Canada and this past weekend in Denmark underscores the threat from emboldened HVEs and, how a rapid succession of such incidents could motivate individuals to attempt to replicate these attacks.

The intensive media focus on each such attack only heightens the incentive to carry out even more of them.

The perceived success of previous lone offender attacks—combined with al-Qa'ida's, AQAP's, and ISIL's incendiary propaganda promoting individual acts of terrorism—has raised the profile of this tactic.

The Homegrown Violent Extremists that we worry about make use of a diverse online environment that is dynamic, evolving, and self-sustaining.

We believe that this online environment is likely to play a critical role in the foreseeable future in radicalizing and mobilizing HVEs towards violence.

Despite the removal of important terrorist leaders during the last several years, the online environment continues to perpetuate a group identity among those with extremist views.

That online environment also supplies a long list of grievances and sources of motivations, and it also provides HVEs the means to connect groups and individuals here and overseas who share the same views.

This boundless virtual environment, combined with terrorists' sophisticated use of social media, makes it increasingly difficult to protect our young people here in the US from being drawn into this world.

Though ISIL is not the only group that does this, it is clear that ISIL's online media presence has become increasingly sophisticated at disseminating timely, high-quality media content across multiple platforms.

And it is this propaganda that we worry may serve as the factor that turns someone with extreme views into someone who is willing to kill people, even in their own community.

So, in a nutshell, that is the threat we see as most likely here in the Homeland. Relatively simple, but potentially deadly and violent attacks, carried out by individuals motivated to violence by what they are seeing and consuming on line from around the world.





Looking overseas, I will take a quick few minutes to speak to the terrorist groups of most significant concern around the world, speaking first about ISIL in Iraq and Syria.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

ISIL has exploited the conflict in Syria and sectarian tensions in Iraq to entrench itself in both countries.

In November, ISIL publicly announced its expansion into Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, and last month the group publicly confirmed the announcement of an affiliate in South Asia.

The allegiance of violent extremists in these countries provides ISIL greater operational reach and helps legitimize its self-appointed position as the leader of all Muslims.

The growth of ISIL's support in Libya most likely provides the group with an additional safe haven where it can collaborate with other North African terrorists aligned with ISIL and to possibly plot attacks.

Our latest assessment on ISIL's strength places the group's manpower between 20,000 and 31,500 members. Sunni groups that ISIL is fighting with in Iraq also augment the group's strength in that battlefield.

ISIL's control over the Iraq-Syria border enables the group to easily move members between Iraq and Syria, which can rapidly change the number of fighters in either country. ISIL is also drawing some recruits from the more than 20,000 foreign fighters who have traveled to Syria.

ISIL's momentum on the battlefield in Iraq and Syria has slowed in recent months in the face of coalition airstrikes and ground offensives by Iraqi Security Forces, Kurdish Peshmerga, and Shia militia forces. Coalition airstrikes have also killed important ISIL military commanders.

Nonetheless, ISIL maintains a deep bench of leaders and continues to launch local offensives to capture terrain while shoring up defenses in its strongholds. The large swaths of eastern Syria and western Iraq that ISIL controls provides the group established sanctuaries from which they plan, train, and plot terrorist acts.

ISIL has also challenged core al-Qa'ida for primacy within the global terrorist movement and ISIL's ascendance has caused rifts within some al-Qa'ida-aligned groups, creating a sense of competition among terrorist actors.

ISIL also continues to hold foreign hostages, even after its brutal execution of Americans James Foley, Steven Sotloff, and Peter Kassig.

ISIL's threat extends beyond the region, to the West. There have been at least 18 ISIL-linked attacks against western interests in the past year, resulting in 24 deaths and 11 injuries.





Last September, ISIL's spokesman and external operations chief called on ISIL sympathizers worldwide to attack Westerners in their home countries, a call to action that the group has repeated in its English-language propaganda. And we assess that this call is a significant part of the reason that we assess we are seeing an uptick in the number of smaller scale, individualized attacks in Europe.

Even if ISIL proves itself incapable of planning and executing attacks in the West on the scale of the 9/11 attack, it's increasingly clear that the group can motivate individuals to carry out the kinds of attacks that create fear and uncertainty among populations all across the world.

al-Qa'ida

Turning now to a more familiar terrorism topic, core al-Qa'ida. Al-Qa'ida's diminished leadership cadre will continue to pose a threat to western interests in South Asia and would attempt to strike the Homeland should an opportunity arise.

We assess that Pakistan- and Afghanistan-based al-Qa'ida adherents still aspire to conduct attacks against the West, even if the group's diminished leadership could not replicate the impact and casualties of a 9/11-style attack.

Despite ISIL's challenge, al-Qa'ida's leader al-Zawahiri remains the recognized leader of the global terrorist movement among al-Qa'ida affiliates and allies, and the groups continue to defer to his guidance on critical issues.

Since the start of the Arab unrest in North Africa and the Middle East, Zawahiri and other members of the group's leadership have directed their focus there, encouraging cadre and associates to support and take advantage of the unrest.

We have long forecast a downturn in the security environment in Afghanistan and, with the end of our combat mission there and the decreasing numbers of American troops.

And as that process proceeds, we are entering a period where we begin to measure the impact of this decline.

Al-Qa'ida's primary presence in Afghanistan currently consists of small numbers in the country's remote northeast, and our chief concern is that a power vacuum could emerge which in turn might offer the group space to reconstitute there and pose a continued threat to the Homeland.

Khorasan

Related to the al-Qa'ida Homeland threat I just talked about, we are also focused on network in Syria if





core al-Qa'ida-linked terrorists who share a history of training operatives, facilitating fighters and money, and planning attacks against U.S. and Western targets.

We believe that this so called Khorasan Group—composed of fighters with experience in conflicts in Chechnya, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Iran, Yemen, and North Africa—is taking advantage of the Syrian conflict to advance attacks against Western interests.

We also believe the group is actively recruiting Westerners to serve as external operatives to blend into their home countries. As US military operations began last fall, the air strikes in Syria that our military has conducted have primarily been aimed at going after this particular threat network.

And the intelligence community is continuing to monitor the group for reactions to these strikes to inform our assessments of their effectiveness and to understand what level of threat we are still facing.

AQAP

Elsewhere in the Middle East, we are also closely following events in Yemen and the threat we face from the Al-Qa'ida group there, called AQAP. Just last week, the collapse of the government in Yemen resulted in our embassy closing there, which cause us to lose insight into what AQAP is doing to plot attacks against our interests in the region and here at home.

January's attack on the Charlie Hebdo magazine office in Paris was AQAP's first successful lethal operation in the West. Although the degree of command and control of the operation is still under investigation, both the attackers and AQAP attributed the attack to the group.

AQAP's three attempted attacks against the United States to date—the Christmas Day underwear bomb plot of December 2009, an attempted attack against U.S.-bound cargo planes in October 2010, and another airliner plot in May 2012—demonstrate the group's continued pursuit of high-profile attacks against the United States.

In a propaganda video released in December, a senior leader threatened American citizens all over the world, highlighting AQAP's persistent interest in targeting the U.S.

AQAP also continues its efforts to radicalize and mobilize to violence individuals outside Yemen through the publication of its English-language magazine *Inspire*.

In December, the group released the 13th edition with instructions for crafting a concealable non-metallic explosive device, similar to the explosive AQAP used when it attempted to blow up an airliner bound for Detroit in December 2009, and called for individuals to attack Western airliners.

Previous editions have encouraged “lone offender” attacks in the West, naming specific targets in the United States, United Kingdom, and France and provided instructions on how to construct a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device.





In short, the threat emanating from Yemen remains just as worrisome as ever, even if much of the world is now focused on threats emanating from Syria and Iraq.

Closing

In closing, the terrorist threat is diffuse and enduring. In addition to my quick tour around the world, I could very easily have added a host of other places to the list of countries where terrorism is a critical problem: Libya, Somalia, Kenya, Pakistan, Mali, Nigeria, and several more.

But I will instead sum up by simply saying that the trend lines are troubling:

- There is a growing resonance among individual extremists of the calls for do-it-yourself attacks
- At the same time, we have less and less insight into terrorist planning because of the spread of encryption technology and the shrinking opportunity for human intelligence sources when it comes to troubled spots like Syria, Libya, and Yemen
- And lastly, we are dealing with an unprecedented flow of foreign fighters who could return from Iraq and Syria to attack their home countries, including the U.S.

Today more than ever, our first line of defense is the community of first responders around the country, and nowhere more so than here in New York City, where NYPD owns the task of keeping New Yorkers safe from terrorist attack.

This Shield program really mirrors the mission I have at NCTC: analyzing and understanding the threat, sharing threat information with everybody who needs to have it, and making sure we do whatever we need to do to give you the tools and information you need to prevent terrorist attacks.

Thank you for this opportunity to meet with you today.

