



HEARING BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON  
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS  
“THREATS TO THE HOMELAND”

THE HONORABLE NICHOLAS J. RASMUSSEN  
DIRECTOR, NATIONAL COUNTERTERRORISM CENTER  
STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

September 27, 2017

Thank you, Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member McCaskill, and Members of the Committee, for the opportunity to be with you today. I am pleased to be joined by my colleagues and close partners, Acting Secretary Elaine Duke from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and Director Christopher Wray of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

**Threat Overview**

Over the past 16 years, we have made tremendous progress in our ability to detect and prevent multi-actor, catastrophic attacks like September 11, 2001. We, along with many of our partners, have built a national security apparatus that has substantially expanded our ability to protect the safety and security of our communities. We share more information—with more frequency and with more partners—than we ever would have imagined possible a decade ago. And, we have reduced external threats emanating from core al-Qa’ida and the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq ash Sham, or ISIS, due to aggressive counterterrorism (CT) actions against these groups.

However, both ISIS and al-Qa’ida have proven to be extremely resilient organizations. ISIS’s strategy to project its influence worldwide, despite geographic losses in Iraq and Syria, by using attacks and propaganda perpetuates fear and continues to attract violent extremists who wish to do us harm. Other terrorist groups around the world also continue to exploit safe havens created by ungoverned spaces and threaten the United States and our allies. Therefore, despite the progress we have made, it is our assessment that the current terrorism threat environment is increasingly complex, challenging, and geographically expansive, as we saw with the recent attacks in the UK, Spain, and Iran. It is also our assessment that NCTC, along with our federal partners, must expand our investment in terrorist prevention, specifically in the Homeland to prevent the recruitment of American youth and ensure we are equipped to respond to and prevent all forms of violence.





## HVEs

First, allow me to provide an overview of the most immediate threat to the Homeland which is the threat of violence carried out by Homegrown Violent Extremists (HVEs). While there are multiple factors that mobilize HVEs to violence, ISIS's large-scale media and propaganda efforts will likely continue to reach and influence HVEs in the United States. So far this year, there have been fewer attacks in the United States than the past two years, and we are working to determine the potential factors that may be responsible for this decrease in successful attacks. Arrests of HVEs remain at similar levels.

What we have seen over time is that HVEs—either lone actors or small insular groups—tend to gravitate toward soft targets and simple tactics of opportunity that do not require advanced skills or outside training. We expect that most HVEs will continue to focus on soft targets, while still considering traditional targets, such as military personnel, law enforcement, and other symbols of the U.S. government. Some HVEs—such as the Orlando shooter in June 2016 and the San Bernardino shooters in December 2015—may have conducted attacks against personally significant targets. The convergence of violent extremist ideology and personal grievances or perceived affronts likely played a role in motivating these HVEs to attack. We are still working to learn more about what may have motivated suspects in other recent attacks.

## ISIS

ISIS continues to pursue multiple avenues of attack with varying levels of support provided by the group. Over the course of the year we have seen a spectrum of attack plots. This spectrum ranges from those “inspired” by the group—in which ISIS claims responsibility for attacks where the attackers had no direct ties to the group—to attacks “enabled” by the group—when ISIS reaches out to individuals through secure communications to prompt an attack—to “directed” ones, in which the group provides direct support from Iraq and Syria to attempt attacks.

ISIS's reach and narrative, rooted in unceasing warfare against all enemies, extends beyond the Syria-Iraq battlefield. Since 2014, ISIS has conducted or inspired attacks ranging in tactics and targets—the bombing of a Russian airliner in Egypt; the attacks in Paris at restaurants, a sports stadium, and a concert venue; the killing of hostages and law enforcement officials at a café in Bangladesh; and the growing number of vehicle attacks such as those carried out in Europe—all of which demonstrate how ISIS can capitalize on local networks on the ground for attacks. The threat landscape is less predictable and, while the scale of the capabilities currently demonstrated by most of these violent extremist actors does not rise to the level that core al-Qa'ida had on 9/11, it is fair to say that we face more threats originating in more places and involving more individuals than we have at any time in the past 16 years.





As we saw with the recent arrests in Australia, and with the attacks in Belgium and Istanbul last year, terrorists remain focused on aviation targets because they recognize the economic damage that may result from even unsuccessful attempts to either down aircraft or attack airports, as well as the potential high loss of life, and the attention the media devotes to these attacks. ISIS continues to innovate and test for security vulnerabilities in order to further its external operations and challenge our security apparatus. Since the 9/11 attacks, worldwide security improvements have hardened the aviation sector but have not entirely removed the threat. Violent extremist publications continue to promote the desirability of aviation attacks and have provided information on how to target the air domain.

ISIS's access to resources—both manpower and funds—and territorial control in areas of Syria and Iraq are the ingredients that we traditionally characterize as being critical to the group maintaining an external operations capability, to include ISIS's ability to threaten the Homeland. For that reason, shrinking the size of territory controlled by ISIS, and denying the group access to additional manpower and funds in the form of foreign terrorist fighters and operatives, as well as oil revenue and other financial resources, remains a top priority. Success in these areas will ultimately be an essential part of our efforts to continue reducing the group's ability to pursue external attacks and diminish its global reach and impact. We have made clear progress in these areas: ISIS has lost nearly three quarters of the territory it once controlled in Iraq and over half in Syria; the number of fighters it has in those countries is significantly down, and its illicit income streams are down. But despite this progress, ISIS's ability to carry out terrorist attacks in Syria, Iraq, and abroad has not yet been sufficiently diminished, and the consistent tempo of ISIS-linked terrorist activity is a reminder of the group's continued global reach.

The group's external operations capability has been building and entrenching during the past two years, and we do not think battlefield losses alone will be sufficient to degrade its terrorism capabilities. As we have seen, the group has launched attacks in periods when it held large swaths of territory as well as when under significant pressure from the defeat-ISIS campaign. In addition to its efforts to conduct external attacks from its safe havens in Iraq and Syria, ISIS's capacity to reach sympathizers around the world through its robust social media capability is unprecedented and gives the group access to large numbers of HVEs.

This year, ISIS has lost several key leaders whose deaths deprive the group of senior members with unique skillsets. However, the group's effective propaganda continues to inspire violence even after the removal of key spokesmen, as we have seen by the range of radicalized individuals who continue to look to statements by deceased terrorist figures for guidance and justifications to conduct attacks. ISIS's media enterprise will probably continue to redirect their narrative away from losses to emphasize new opportunities, as seen with ISIS's recent media attention to territories outside the areas it formerly held in Syria and Iraq. They may also try to paint losses as a rallying cry for revenge against local security forces and international CT-actors,





including the United States. Despite international efforts to counter violent extremism, or “CVE”, online, the volume of media availability and its spread across a multitude of platforms and websites will continue to be a challenge but we are steadfast in our containment measures.

Deceased ISIS spokesman and external operations leader Abu Muhammad al-Adnani’s final public statement encouraged ISIS supporters in the United States to conduct attacks at home instead of traveling to Iraq and Syria, suggesting that ISIS recognizes the difficulty in sending operatives to the Homeland for an attack. ISIS likely views the United States as a harder target than Europe because it is further away, U.S. ports of entry are under far less stress from mass migration, and U.S. law enforcement agencies are not overtaxed by persistent unrest, as are some of our counterparts overseas.

The threat environment in Europe is increasingly being driven by Europe-based individuals and small cells who are inspired by ISIS’s call to act or receive general guidance from ISIS members elsewhere in the world. The combination of Europe-based operatives and simpler tactics makes identifying, prioritizing, and disrupting these individuals’ plots more difficult for our European partners to detect and, is a dynamic that the U.S. Government must consider in order to effectively aid our European counterparts in identifying and disrupting future attacks.

Our review of ISIS attacks in Europe since 2015 reveals that most attackers have been radicalized males with EU citizenship, and many were of North African ethnicity with a criminal history. ISIS’s leveraging of criminal, familial, and communal ties contributes to its ability to advance plotting in Europe. Many operatives involved in attacks since 2015 have had similar histories of criminal involvement, often petty crime, before becoming radicalized.

ISIS’s cadre of foreign terrorist fighters remains key in planning and executing external attacks. While only three of the nearly 40 attacks in Europe since 2015 involved foreign terrorist fighter returnees, those attacks caused over half of the fatalities, suggesting that combat experience plays a role in the success of a sophisticated attack. Two years ago, we confirmed that ISIS successfully sent several operatives—including at least two of the Paris attackers—from Syria to Western Europe by having them blend in with the flow of some 1 million migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees who traveled from Turkey to Greece in 2015. We have not seen ISIS successfully replicate this attack method in more than a year, probably because of increased border security and information sharing among our European partners.





## Al-Qa'ida

We remain concerned about al-Qa'ida's safe haven in Syria because of the presence of veteran al-Qa'ida operatives there, some who have been part of the group since before the September 11 attacks, and who are exploiting the conflict there to threaten the U.S. and our allies.

The Nusrah Front, also known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, is al-Qa'ida's largest affiliate and one of the most capable armed groups operating in Syria. Its integration of al-Qa'ida veterans provides the group with strategic guidance and enhances its standing within the al-Qa'ida global movement. We believe the Nusrah Front's statement in July 2016 announcing the separation of the group from the broader al-Qa'ida movement was in name only and that Nusrah Front remains part of al-Qa'ida, supporting its ideology and intent to target the West. We will continue our efforts to counter this group and the threats it poses to the West.

Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, the only known al-Qa'ida affiliate to attempt a directed attack against the United States, continues to exploit the conflict in Yemen to gain new recruits and secure areas of safe-haven, contributing to its enduring threat. The group continues to threaten and call for attacks against the United States in its prolific media production, which includes its English-language Inspire magazine providing instruction and ideological encouragement for individual actors.

We have constrained al-Qa'ida's effectiveness and its ability to recruit, train, and deploy operatives from its safe haven in South Asia; however, this does not mean that the threat from core al-Qa'ida in the tribal areas of Pakistan or in eastern Afghanistan has been eliminated. We believe that al-Qa'ida and its adherents in the region still aspire to conduct attacks and will remain a threat as long as the group can potentially regenerate capability to threaten the Homeland with large-scale attacks. Al-Qa'ida's allies in South Asia—particularly the Taliban and the Haqqani Network—also continue to present a high threat to our regional interests.

We are also cognizant of the level of risk the United States may face over time if al-Qa'ida regenerates, finds renewed safe haven, or restores lost capability. We are on alert for signs that al-Qa'ida's capability to attack the West from South Asia is being restored and would warn immediately if we find trends in that direction. I am confident that the U.S. government will maintain sufficient capability to continue to put pressure on that core al-Qa'ida network and, therefore, reduce the risk of a resurgence by al-Qa'ida in the region.

We also see increasing competition between violent extremist actors within South Asia itself, between and among the Taliban, ISIS's branch in South Asia, and al-Qa'ida. This is an additional dynamic that we are working to understand. While conflict among terrorist groups may well distract them from their core mission of plotting attacks against Western targets, conflict also serves to introduce a degree of uncertainty into the





terrorism landscape that raises questions that I don't think we have answers to yet. This is something we are watching very closely.

### **Hizballah / Iran**

In keeping with the diverse set of threats we face, I would be remiss not to briefly call out the malign activities of Iran and its partner, Lebanese Hizballah. Iran remains the foremost state sponsor of terrorism, providing financial aid, advanced weapons and tactics, and direction to militant and terrorist groups across the Middle East, all while it cultivates its own network of operatives across the globe as part of its international attack infrastructure.

Lebanese Hizballah during recent years has demonstrated its intent to foment regional instability, by deploying thousands of fighters to Syria to fight for the Assad regime; providing weapons, tactics and direction to militant and terrorist groups in Iraq and Yemen; and deploying operatives to Azerbaijan, Egypt, Thailand, Cyprus, and Peru to lay the groundwork for attacks. The group also has devoted significant resources to expanding its arsenal, including advanced rocket and missile capabilities that threaten interests along the eastern Mediterranean and across the Arabian Peninsula.

In the Homeland, FBI's arrest two months ago of two operatives charged with working on behalf of Hizballah was a stark reminder of Hizballah's continued desire to maintain a global attack infrastructure that poses an enduring threat to our interests.

### **Trends**

Stepping back, the two trends in the contemporary threat environment that I highlighted before the Committee last year continue to concern us. The first is the ability of terrorist actors to communicate with each other outside our reach with the use of encrypted communications. Most recently, terrorists have begun widespread use of private groups in encrypted applications to supplement traditional social media for sharing propaganda in an effort to circumvent the intelligence collection and private sector disruption of their public accounts. As a result, collecting information on particular terrorist activities is increasingly difficult.

The second is that we're seeing a proliferation of a rapidly evolving threat or plot vectors that emerge simply by an individual encouraged or inspired to take action who then quickly gathers the few resources needed and moves into an operational phase. ISIS is aware of this, and those connected to the group have understood that by motivating actors in their own locations to take action against Western countries and targets, these actors can be effective, especially if they cannot travel abroad to ISIS-controlled areas. In terms of propaganda and





recruitment, ISIS supporters can generate further support for their movement, even without carrying out catastrophic, mass-casualty attacks. This is an innovation in the terrorist playbook that poses a great challenge. Further, martyrdom videos and official ISIS claims of responsibility for inspired individuals' attacks probably allow the group to convey a greater impression of control over attacks in the West and maximize international media exposure.

### **Terrorism Prevention**

Given these groups' ability to be innovative, the whole-of-government must respond with innovative approaches to prevent the radicalization to violence and recruitment to terrorism of individuals, specifically here in the Homeland. I would like to talk a bit more about what NCTC is doing to prevent and counter violent extremism and the work that we assess still needs to be done.

As a federal government, we have taken steps to organize and resource our efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism more effectively, under the leadership of DHS and the Department of Justice. We have been successful at helping provide communities with the information and tools they need to identify potential extremists and to engage with them before they reach the point of becoming an actual terrorist.

NCTC accomplishes this mainly through a series of Community Awareness Briefings (CAB) and exercises that are produced and presented in cooperation with our interagency partners. As an example, the CAB, is an unclassified presentation on radicalization to violence and violent extremist recruitment designed to build awareness and catalyze community efforts to prevent individuals from mobilizing to criminal activity or violence. We also developed the CAB "Train-the-Presenter" Program, which is designed to train local officials to present the CAB themselves to local audiences. Recently, these were expanded to include all forms of violent extremism in the United States to respond to a growing demand from federal, state, local and community partners for tools that reflect the full domestic threat picture.

I am proud of all of the good work our government – to include my colleagues at NCTC – is doing to prevent terrorism here in the homeland, but the reality is that we have to do more. The scale at which we undertake these efforts is too limited, and it is certainly not sized to tackle the kind of problem we are experiencing here in the Homeland today. But we do know this: prevention work has a positive impact in the places where we have tried it, we are poised to receive significant metrics through the good work of DHS that will help us better evaluate these efforts, and violent extremism is not a monolith.

The bottom line is that our government's work to prevent all forms of violent extremism expands the counterterrorism toolkit beyond the hard power tools of disruption, it is resource efficient, and enables local





partners—including law enforcement, social services providers, schools and communities—to create alternative pathways that can protect our youth from a variety of violent foreign and domestic ideologies. But, we need to reaffirm and expand our commitment to prevention, both resourcing it at the federal, state, and local level, and maintaining a whole-of-government effort to continue to keep Americans safe.

### **Conclusion**

Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member McCaskill, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you this morning. The role that NCTC, FBI, and DHS play in combating terrorism, along with the committee's support - is critically important. The men and women of our nation's counterterrorism community work tirelessly to defeat the efforts of terrorist groups around the globe. There is no doubt that the world today is more challenging and more dangerous. But I would also argue that we have more capacity to defend ourselves—more capacity to keep ourselves safe—than we have ever had before.

Thank you all very much, and I look forward to answering your questions.

