

**Hearing before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
“Cybersecurity, Terrorism, and Beyond: Addressing Evolving Threats to the Homeland”
September 10, 2014**

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

Thank you Chairman Carper, Ranking Member Coburn, and members of the Committee. I appreciate this opportunity to be here today to discuss the terrorist threat against the United States and our efforts to counter it.

I also want to express my appreciation to the Committee for its unflagging support of the men and women at the National Counterterrorism Center. I am particularly pleased to be here today with Undersecretary Taylor, Undersecretary Spaulding, and Executive Assistant Director Anderson who are representing two of our closest partner agencies—the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Together we are a part of the broader counterterrorism community that is more integrated and more collaborative than ever.

Earlier this summer the 9/11 Commissioners released their most recent report, and asked national security leaders to “communicate to the public—in specific terms—what the threat is, and how it is evolving.” With this in mind, Director Olsen recently had an opportunity to provide a sobering but objective assessment of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant’s (ISIL’s) maturation and capability at the Brookings Institution. I similarly think hearings like this are an opportunity to continue this constructive dialogue with the public and their elected representatives.

The Overall Terrorist Threat

In May, the President told the graduating class of West Point cadets, “For the foreseeable future, the most direct threat to America at home and abroad remains terrorism.” The 9/11 Commissioners agreed noting in their July report, “the terrorist threat is evolving, not defeated.” From my vantage point at the National Counterterrorism Center, I would agree. Since we testified before this committee last year, the terrorist threat has evolved, is more geographically diffuse, and involves a greater diversity of actors.

Overseas, the United States faces an enduring threat to our interests, as evidenced by precautionary measures taken at some of our overseas installations. The threat emanates from a broad geographic area, spanning South Asia, across the Middle East, and much of North Africa, where terrorist networks have exploited a lack of governance and lax security.

Here in the United States, last year’s attack against the Boston Marathon highlighted the danger posed by lone actors and insular groups not directly tied to terrorist organizations, as well as the difficulty of identifying these types of plots before they take place. The flow of more than 12,000 foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq with varying degrees of access to Europe and the United

States heightens our concern, as these individuals may eventually return to their home countries battle-hardened, radicalized, and willing to commit violence.

In the face of sustained counterterrorism pressure, core al-Qa'ida has adapted by becoming more decentralized and is shifting away from large-scale, mass casualty plots like the attacks of September 11, 2001. Al-Qa'ida has modified its tactics, encouraging its adherents to adopt simpler attacks that do not require the same degree of resources, training, and planning.

Instability in the Levant, Middle East, and across North Africa has accelerated this decentralization of the al-Qa'ida movement, which is increasingly influenced by local and regional factors and conditions. This diffusion has also led to the emergence of new power centers and an increase in threats by networks of like-minded violent extremists with allegiances to multiple groups. Ultimately, this less centralized network poses a more diverse and geographically dispersed threat and is likely to result in increased low-level attacks against U.S. and European interests overseas.

Today, I will begin by examining the terrorist threats to the homeland and then outline the threat to U.S. interests overseas. I will then focus the remainder of my remarks on outlining some of NCTC's efforts to address this complicated threat picture.

Threat to the Homeland

Starting with the homeland, we remain concerned about terrorist groups' efforts to target Western aviation. In early July, 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. This past winter, additional security measures surrounding commercial aviation were implemented to address threats to the Sochi Olympics. Although unrelated, taken together these two instances are illustrative of the fact that 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.

Nevertheless, we do assess that AQAP remains the al-Qa'ida affiliate most likely to attempt transnational attacks against the United States. The group's repeated efforts to conceal explosive devices to destroy aircraft demonstrate its longstanding interest in targeting Western aviation. Its three attempted attacks demonstrate the group's continued pursuit of high-profile attacks against the West, its awareness of Western security procedures, and its efforts to adapt.

Despite AQAP's ambitions, Homegrown Violent Extremists (HVEs) remain the most likely immediate threat to the homeland. The overall level of HVE activity is likely to stay the same: a handful of uncoordinated and unsophisticated plots emanating from a pool of up to a few hundred individuals. Lone actors or insular groups who act autonomously pose the most serious HVE threat, and we assess HVEs will likely continue gravitating to simpler plots that do not require advanced skills, outside training, or communications with others.

The Boston Marathon bombing underscores the threat from HVEs who are motivated to act violently by themselves or in small groups. In the months prior to the attack, the Boston Marathon bombers exhibited few behaviors that law enforcement and intelligence officers

traditionally used to detect readiness to commit violence. The perceived success of previous lone offender attacks combined with al-Qa'ida's and AQAP's propaganda promoting individual acts of terrorism is raising the profile of this tactic.

HVEs make use of a diverse online environment that is dynamic, evolving, and self-sustaining. 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 reinforce a violent extremist identity, supplies grievances, and provides HVEs the means to connect with terrorist groups overseas.

This boundless virtual environment, combined with terrorists' increasingly sophisticated use of social media, makes it increasingly difficult to protect our youth from sometimes horrifically brutal propaganda. ISIL's online media presence has become increasingly sophisticated, disseminating timely, high-quality media content across multiple platforms.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

ISIL is a terrorist organization that has exploited the conflict in Syria and sectarian tensions in Iraq to entrench itself in both countries. The group's strength and expansionary agenda pose an increasing threat to our regional allies and to U.S. facilities and personnel in both the Middle East and the West.

ISIL's goal is to solidify and expand its control of territory and govern by implementing its violent interpretation of *sharia* law. The group aspires to overthrow governments in the region, govern all the territory that the early Muslim caliphs controlled, and expand even further. ISIL's claim to have re-established the caliphate demonstrates the group's desire to lead violent extremists around the world.

Then Iraq-based ISIL exploited the conflict and chaos in Syria to expand its operations across the border. The group, with al-Qaida's approval, established the al-Nusrah Front as a cover for its Syria-based activities but in April 2013, publicly declared its presence in Syria under the ISIL name. ISIL accelerated its efforts to overthrow the Iraqi government, seizing control of Fallujah this past January. The group marched from its safe haven in Syria and across the border into northern Iraq, killing thousands of Iraqi Muslims on its way to seizing Mosul this June.

Along the way, ISIL aggressively recruited new adherents. Some joined ISIL to escape Assad's brutal treatment and oppression of his own people. Others joined out of frustration, marginalized by their own government. But many joined out of intimidation and fear, forced to choose either obedience to ISIL or a violent, oftentimes public death.

The withdrawal of Iraqi Security Forces during those initial military engagements has left ISIL with large swaths of ungoverned territory. It has established sanctuaries in Syria and Iraq from where they plan, train, and plot terrorist acts with little interference. Our latest assessment of ISIL's strength places the group at more than 10,000 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 12,000 foreign fighters who have traveled to Syria.

ISIL's recent victories have provided the group with a wide array of weapons, equipment, and other resources. Battlefield successes also have given ISIL an extensive war chest, which as of early this month probably includes around \$1 million per day in revenues from black-market oil sales, smuggling, robberies, and ransom payments for hostages.

Notably, ISIL has sought to call into question the legitimacy of Ayman al-Zawahiri's succession of Usama bin Laden. While al-Qa'ida core remains the ideological leader of the global terrorist movement, its primacy is being challenged by the rise of ISIL whose territorial gains, increasing access to a large pool of foreign fighters, and brutal tactics are garnering significantly greater media attention. We continue to monitor for signs of fracturing within al-Qa'ida's recognized affiliates.

ISIL's safe haven in Syria and Iraq and the group's access to resources pose an immediate and direct threat to U.S. personnel and facilities in the region. This includes our embassy in Baghdad and our consulate in Erbil—and, of course, it includes the Americans held hostage by ISIL.

But ISIL's threat extends beyond the region, to the West. This January, ISIL's leader publicly threatened "direct confrontation" with the U.S., and has repeatedly taunted Americans, most recently through the horrifically graphic execution of two journalists who were reporting on the plight of the Syrian people. In Europe, the arrest of an ISIL-connected individual in France who possessed several explosive devices and a shooting in Brussels by an ISIL-trained fighter clearly demonstrate this threat, and the threat returning foreign fighters pose.

The FBI has arrested more than half a dozen individuals seeking to travel from the U.S. to Syria to support ISIL. We remain mindful of the possibility that an ISIL-sympathizer could conduct a limited, self-directed attack here at home with no warning.

Al-Qa'ida Core and Afghanistan/Pakistan-based Groups

Turning now to core al-Qa'ida and Afghanistan/Pakistan-based groups, we anticipate that despite core al-Qa'ida's diminished leadership cadre, remaining members will continue to pose a threat to Western interests in South Asia and would attempt to strike the homeland should an opportunity arise. Al-Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's public efforts to promote individual acts of violence in the West have increased, as the Pakistan-based group's own capabilities have diminished.

Despite ISIL's challenge, Zawahiri remains the recognized leader of the global jihadist 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.

South Asia-Based Militants. Pakistani and Afghan militant groups—including Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Haqqani Network, and Lashkar-e Tayyiba (LT)—continue to pose a direct threat to U.S. interests and our allies in the region, where these groups probably will remain focused. We continue to watch for indicators that any of these groups, networks, or individuals are actively pursuing or have decided to incorporate operations outside of South Asia as a strategy to achieve their objectives.

TTP remains a significant threat in Pakistan despite the ongoing Pakistan military operations in North Waziristan and leadership changes during the past year. Its claim of responsibility for the June attack on the Jinnah International Airport in Karachi that killed about 30 people underscores the threat the group poses inside the country.

The Haqqani network is one of the most capable and lethal terrorist groups in Afghanistan and poses a serious threat to the stability of the Afghan state as we approach 2014 and beyond. Last month, the Department of State listed four high-ranking Haqqani members—Aziz Haqqani, Khalil Haqqani, Yahya Haqqani, and Qari Abdul Rauf—on the “Rewards for Justice” most-wanted list for their involvement in terrorist attacks in Afghanistan and ties to al-Qa‘ida. The Haqqanis have conducted numerous high-profile attacks against U.S., NATO, Afghan Government, and other allied nation targets. In October 2013, Afghan security forces intercepted a truck bomb deployed by the Haqqanis against Forward Operating Base Goode in the Paktiya Province. The device, which did not detonate, contained some 61,500 pounds of explosives and constitutes the largest truck bomb ever recovered in Afghanistan.

Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LT) remains focused on its regional goals in South Asia. The group is against improving relations between India and Pakistan, and its leaders consistently speak out against India and the United States, accusing both countries of trying to destabilize Pakistan. LT has attacked Western interests in South Asia in pursuit of its regional objectives, as demonstrated by the targeting of hotels frequented by Westerners during the Mumbai attacks in 2008. LT leaders almost certainly recognize that an attack on the U.S. would result in intense international backlash against Pakistan and endanger the group's safe haven there. However, LT also provides training to Pakistani and Western militants, some of whom could plot terrorist attacks in the West without direction from LT leadership.

Al-Qa‘ida Affiliates

AQAP. Al-Qa‘ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) remains the affiliate most likely to attempt transnational attacks against the United States. AQAP's three attempted attacks against the United States to date—the airliner plot of December 2009, an attempted attack against U.S.-bound cargo planes in October 2010, and an airliner plot in May 2012—demonstrate the group's continued pursuit of high-profile attacks against the United States. In a propaganda video released in March, the group's leader threatened the U.S. in a speech to recruits in Yemen, highlighting AQAP's persistent interest in targeting the United States.

AQAP also presents a high threat to U.S. personnel and facilities in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. In response to credible al-Qa'ida threat reporting in August 2013, the State Department issued a global travel alert and closed U.S. embassies in the Middle East and North Africa as part of an effort to take precautionary steps against such threats. We assess that we at least temporarily delayed this particular plot, but we continue to track closely the status of AQAP plotting against our facilities and personnel in Yemen. AQAP continues to kidnap Westerners in Yemen and carry out numerous small-scale attacks and large-scale operations against Yemeni government targets, demonstrating the range of the group's capabilities. In addition, this past July AQAP launched its first successful attack in Saudi Arabia since 2009, underscoring the group's continued focus on operations in the Kingdom.

Finally, AQAP continues its efforts to radicalize and mobilize to violence individuals outside Yemen through the publication of its English-language magazine *Inspire*. Following the Boston Marathon bombings, AQAP released a special edition of the magazine claiming that accused bombers Tamarlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev were "inspired by *Inspire*," highlighting the attack's simple, repeatable nature, and tying it to alleged U.S. oppression of Muslims worldwide. The most recent *Inspire* issue in March—AQAP's twelfth—continued to encourage "lone offender" attacks in the West, naming specific targets in the United States, United Kingdom, and France and providing instructions on how to construct a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device.

Al-Shabaab. We continue to monitor al-Shabaab and its foreign fighter cadre as a potential threat to the U.S. homeland, as some al-Shabaab leaders have publicly called for transnational attacks and the group has attracted dozens of U.S. persons—mostly ethnic Somalis—who have traveled to Somalia since 2006. The death of al-Shabaab's leader Ahmed Abdi in a recent strike by U.S. military forces raises the possibility of potential retaliatory attacks against our personnel and facilities in East Africa.

Al-Shabaab is mainly focused on undermining the Somali Federal Government and combating African Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and regional military forces operating in Somalia. While al-Shabaab's mid-September 2013 attack on the Westgate mall in Kenya demonstrated that the group continues to plot against regional and Western targets across East Africa, as part of its campaign to remove foreign forces aiding the Somali Government.

AQIM and regional allies. Al-Qa'ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its allies remain focused on local and regional attack plotting, including targeting Western interests. The groups have shown minimal interest in targeting the U.S. homeland.

In Mali, the French-led military intervention has pushed AQIM and its allies from the cities that they once controlled, but the groups maintain safe haven in the less populated areas of northern Mali from which they are able to plan and launch attacks against French and allied forces in the region. Elsewhere, AQIM is taking advantage of permissive operating environments across much of North Africa to broaden its reach. We are concerned that AQIM may be collaborating with local violent extremists, including Ansar al-Sharia groups in Libya and Tunisia.

In August of last year, two highly capable AQIM offshoots, Mokhtar Belmokhtar's al-Mulathamun battalion and Tawhid Wal Jihad in West Africa, merged to form the new violent extremist group—al-Murabitun—which will almost certainly seek to conduct additional high profile attacks against Western interests across the region. Belmokhtar—the group's external operations commander—played a leading role in attacks against Western interests in Northwest Africa in 2013, with his January attack on an oil facility in In-Amenas, Algeria and double suicide bombings in Niger in May. Early this year, Belmokhtar relocated from Mali to Libya to escape counterterrorism pressure, and probably to collaborate with Ansar al-Sharia (AAS) and other violent extremist elements in the country to advance his operational goals.

Boko Haram is waging unprecedented violence in northeast Nigeria this year and is expanding its reach into other parts of Nigeria and neighboring states to implement its harsh version of *sharia* law and suppress the Nigerian Government and regional CT pressure. Since late 2012, Boko Haram and its splinter faction Ansaru have claimed responsibility for five kidnappings of Westerners, raising their international profile and highlighting the threat they pose to Western and regional interests. Boko Haram has kidnapped scores of additional Nigerians in northeast Nigeria since the kidnapping of 276 school girls from Chibok, Nigeria in April 2014.

Al Nusrah Front. Al-Nusrah Front is one of the most capable groups within the Syrian opposition and has mounted suicide, explosive, and firearms attacks against regime and security targets across the country; it has also sought to provide limited public services and governance to the local population in areas under its control. Several Westerners have joined al-Nusrah Front, including a few who have perished in suicide operations, raising concerns capable individuals with extremist contacts and battlefield experience could return to their home countries to commit violence. In April 2013, Al-Nusrah Front's leader, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, pledged allegiance to al-Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, publicly affirming the group's ties to core al-Qa'ida. Al-Zawahiri named the group al-Qaida's recognized affiliate in the region later last year, ordering ISIL to return to Iraq.

Al-Qa'ida in the Indian Subcontinent. This month, al-Qa'ida announced the establishment of its newest affiliate, al-Qa'ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). Al-Qa'ida used social media and online web forums to make known the existence of AQIS, which al-Qa'ida said it has worked for more than two years to create. We assess the creation of AQIS is not a reaction to al-Qa'ida's split with ISIL, though the timing of the announcement may be used to bolster al-Qa'ida's standing in the global jihad movement. AQIS, which is led by Sheikh Asim Umer, has stated objectives that include violence against the U.S., establishing Islamic law in South Asia, ending occupation of Muslim lands, and defending Afghanistan under Mullah Omar's leadership.

Threat from Shia Groups

Iran and Hizballah remain committed to defending the Assad regime, including sending billions of dollars in military and economic aid, training pro-regime and Shia militants, and

deploying their own personnel into the country. Iran and Hizballah view the Assad regime as a key partner in an “axis of resistance” against Israel and the West and are prepared to take major risks to preserve the regime as well as their critical transshipment routes.

Lebanese Hizballah. In May of last year, Hizballah publicly admitted that it is fighting for the Syrian regime and its chief, Hasan Nasrallah, framed the war as an act of self-defense against Western-backed Sunni violent extremists. Hizballah continues sending capable fighters for pro-regime operations and support for a pro-regime militia. Additionally, Iran and Hizballah are leveraging allied Iraqi Shi’a militant and terrorist groups to participate in counter-opposition operations. This active support to the Assad regime is driving increased Sunni violent extremist attacks and sectarian unrest in Lebanon.

Beyond its role in Syria, Lebanese Hizballah remains committed to conducting terrorist activities worldwide and we remain concerned the group’s activities could either endanger or target U.S. and other Western interests. The group has engaged in an aggressive terrorist campaign in recent years and continues attack planning abroad. In April 2014, two Hizballah operatives were arrested in Thailand and one admitted that they were there to carry out a bomb attack against Israeli tourists, underscoring the threat to civilian centers.

Iranian Threat. In addition to its role in Syria, Iran remains the foremost state sponsor of terrorism, and works through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force and Ministry of Intelligence and Security to support groups that target U.S. and Israeli interests globally. In March, Israel interdicted a maritime vessel that departed Iran and was carrying munitions judged to be intended for Gaza-based Palestinian militants. Iran, largely through Qods Force Commander Soleimani, has also provided support to Shia militias and the Iraqi government to combat ISIL in Iraq.

Iran continues to be willing to conduct terrorist operations against its adversaries. This is demonstrated by Iran’s links to terrorist operations in Azerbaijan, Georgia, India, and Thailand in 2012. Iran also continues to provide lethal aid and support the planning and execution of terrorist acts by other groups, in particular Lebanese Hizballah.

Taken together, the current threat landscape is a manifestation of the transformation of the global jihadist movement over the past several years. This movement has diversified and expanded in the aftermath of the upheaval and political chaos in the Arab world since late 2010. The threat now comes from a more decentralized array of organizations and networks.

NCTC’s Counterterrorism Efforts

The United States, United Kingdom, France, and the broader international community have increasingly expressed concerns about the greater than 12,000 foreign fighters who could potentially return to their home countries to participate in or support terrorist attacks. The UK’s Home Secretary announced the terrorist threat level in the United Kingdom had been raised to severe, explaining, “The increase in threat level is related to developments in Syria and Iraq where terrorist groups are planning attacks against the West. Some of those plots are likely to

involve foreign fighters who have traveled there from the UK and Europe to take part in those conflicts.”

Syria remains the preeminent location for independent or al-Qa‘ida-aligned groups to recruit, train, and equip a growing number of extremists, some of whom we assess may seek to conduct external attacks. The rate of travelers into Syria exceeds the rate of travelers who went into Afghanistan/Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen, or Somalia at any point in the last ten years.

European governments estimate that more than 2,000 westerners have traveled to join the fight against the Assad regime, which includes more than 500 from Great Britain, 700 from France, and 400 from Germany. Additionally, over 100 U.S. persons from a variety of backgrounds and locations in the United States have traveled or attempted to travel to Syria.

NCTC, FBI, and DHS are part of a broader U.S. government and international effort to resolve the identities of potential violent extremists and identify potential threats emanating from Syria. As you know, this committee and the Congress charged NCTC with maintaining the U.S. government’s central and shared knowledge bank of known and suspected international terrorists (or KSTs), their contacts, and their support networks. To manage this workload, NCTC developed a database called TIDE – the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment.

TIDE is much more than a screening database – it is an analytic database. It feeds the unclassified screening database so that DHS, the State Department, and other agencies have timely and accurate information about known and suspected terrorists. As disparate pieces of information about KSTs are received, trained analysts create new records, most often as the result of a nomination by a partner agency. The records are updated—or “enhanced”—regularly as new, related information is included and dated or as unnecessary information is removed. In all cases, there are several layers of review before a nomination is accepted into the system. In the case of U.S. persons, there are at least four layers of review, including a legal review, to ensure the derogatory information is sufficient and meets appropriate standards.

To better manage and update the identities of individuals who have travelled overseas to engage in violence in Syria and Iraq, we’ve created a special threat case in TIDE. This is a special feature in the TIDE system which allows us to focus efforts on smaller groups of individuals. A threat case links all known actors, and their personal information, involved in a particular threat stream or case and makes that information available to the intelligence, screening, and law enforcement communities.

NCTC’s management of this unique consolidation of terrorist identities has created a valuable forum for identifying and sharing information about Syrian foreign fighters—including ISIL—with community partners. It has better integrated the community’s efforts to identify, enhance, and expedite the nomination of Syrian foreign fighter records to the Terrorist Screening Database for placement in U.S. government screening systems.

Counterterrorism efforts focused on law enforcement disruptions are critical to mitigating threats. We also recognize that government alone cannot solve this problem and interdicting or arresting terrorists is not the full solution. Well-informed and well-equipped families,

communities, and local institutions represent the best long-term defense against violent extremism.

To this end, we continue to refine and expand the preventive side of counterterrorism. Working with DHS, in the last year NCTC revamped the Community Awareness Briefing (CAB), a key tool we use to convey information to local communities and authorities on the terrorist recruitment threat. The CAB now also includes information on the recruitment efforts of violent extremist groups based in Syria and Iraq. Additionally, this year NCTC and DHS developed and implemented a new program – the Community Resilience Exercise program, designed to improve communication between law enforcement and communities and to share ideas on how to counter violent extremism.

Conclusion

Confronting these threats and working with resolve to prevent another terrorist attack remains the counterterrorism community's overriding mission. This year, NCTC celebrates its 10th year in service to the nation, and while the Center has matured tremendously over that period, we are focused on positioning ourselves to be better prepared to address the terrorist threat in decades to come.

Chairman Carper, Ranking Member Coburn, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you this morning. I want to assure you that our attention is concentrated on the security crises in Iraq and Syria—and rightly so. But we continue to detect, disrupt, and defeat threats from across the threat spectrum.

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