Hearing before the Senate Committee on
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

"Combatting the Terrorist Threat Through Agility, Persistence, and Resilience"

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Statement for the Record

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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, Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Director Christopher Wray of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

Threat Overview

In the years since 9/11, the U.S. counterterrorism (CT) community and its many foreign and domestic partners have continued to achieve significant successes against terrorist groups around the world through enhanced information sharing, aggressive intelligence collection, targeted military action, and terrorism prevention programs. Most notably, coalition operations against the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria are now depriving the group of its last territorial holdings in the so-called caliphate. In addition, ongoing CT efforts across Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia continue to diminish the ranks of al-Qa'ida, removing dozens of experienced leaders and operatives. Interagency efforts to enhance our defenses and vigilance at home, including strengthened aviation security measures and border control initiatives, have resulted in substantial progress in safeguarding the Homeland from terrorist attacks.

Despite these considerable achievements, the United States faces an increasingly dynamic terrorist threat from a more diverse range of groups who continue to explore methods to defeat our defenses and strike the West. Terrorists are responding to recent setbacks by adapting their tactics, seeking out alternate safe havens, and using new technologies to recruit and train the next generation of terrorists. Such trends make for a more dispersed, fluid, and unpredictable terrorist threat that requires a persistent and agile U.S. response to mitigate. Given the challenging national security landscape that confronts the United States today, the relative priority attributed to the terrorist threat is being reevaluated. Nevertheless we will need to ensure that we maintain the many improvements made across the government in countering terrorism since 9/11.

HVEs

As we have assessed in recent years, U.S.-based homegrown violent extremists (HVEs) remain the most persistent Islamist terrorist threat from al-Qa'ida and ISIS-affiliated supporters to the United States. So far this year, we have experienced at least three attacks in the United States by HVEs compared with five in 2017. HVEs continue to be motivated by a wide range of factors including ISIS and al-Qa'ida propaganda, grievances against the U.S. Government, and other personal factors. HVEs also look to employ a range of tactics against predominantly soft targets, although some individuals have expressed interest in targeting law enforcement and military personnel.

In terms of other broader trends we can glean from recent HVE cases, we judge that the vast majority of people who conduct terrorism-related activities in the United States are born here or radicalize several years after entering the country. In addition, no consistent profile has emerged among HVEs—they have a diverse range of backgrounds, ages, and geographic locations. With regard to travel, we continue to observe a decrease in the number of Americans attempting to travel to conflict zones to join terrorist organizations. Finally, and of particular concern, we have observed several minors engaging in or attempting to engage in violent extremist acts in the United States this year, highlighting the appeal terrorist narratives have to vulnerable youth.

ISIS

As I noted previously, our successes against ISIS this year have been substantial. Thousands of its members, including senior leaders, veteran field commanders, and foreign fighters, have been killed in U.S. airstrikes and partner actions, greatly reducing the group's freedom of movement. Battlefield attrition has also curtailed the group's ability to exploit local resources, reducing its revenue flows. Outside of Iraq and Syria, the United States and our partners have achieved successes against ISIS's foreign branches and networks in Afghanistan, the Philippines, and across North Africa by arresting or removing senior leaders and prominent operatives.

ISIS, however, remains an adaptive and dangerous adversary, and is already tailoring its strategy to sustain operations amid mounting losses. In Iraq and Syria, the group's leaders are adopting a clandestine posture, moving to rural safe havens in order to support a long-term insurgency. In recent months, the group has conducted a wide range of raids, ambushes, and suicide attacks—asymmetric tactics that are intended to conserve group resources while exhausting its adversaries. The group's media functions and rate-of-output have been reduced this year, but its propaganda fronts still produce a range of high-quality content including foreign language products that promote its evolving narrative of enduring resistance and vitality.

Although ISIS's safe haven in Iraq and Syria has largely collapsed, its global enterprise of almost two dozen branches and networks, each numbering in the hundreds to thousands of members, remains robust. In Afghanistan, for instance, ISIS's local branch has conducted a spate of high-profile attacks against civilian and government targets in Kabul while carving out a safe haven in

the eastern part of the country. Other branches in Libya, the Sinai, West Africa, and Yemen continue to mobilize fighters and execute attacks against local governments and group rivals, fomenting and leveraging instability in these already beleaguered areas. Other, less formal ISIS-aligned networks, including elements in Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Philippines, continue to conduct attacks that showcase the group's reach.

Al-Qa'ida

With regard to the enduring threat from the al-Qa'ida network, the group continues to suffer setbacks; yet, it has enjoyed some success strengthening the resilience and cohesiveness of its global network. For instance, the group's media releases this year have adapted faster to current events, featuring synchronized statements from leaders including Ayman al-Zawahiri. We are concerned that improved coordination among its geographically dispersed nodes as reflected in its media efforts could improve the network's ability to advance its long-held, core goal of striking the Homeland.

The group maintains a global reach through its network of affiliates, led by seasoned veterans who work to advance its violent agenda. Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has been diminished this year by the loss of fighters and skilled personnel, but the group continues to launch attacks against its rivals while generating media products that urge extremists to target the West. In Somalia, al-Shabaab is waging a relentless campaign of bombings and assassinations targeting local government forces, including an attack in June that killed a U.S. soldier. In North Africa, al-Qa'ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) leaders oversee a geographically dispersed and diverse network of extremists who are working to expand their influence while plotting attacks against Western facilities and personnel. Al-Qa'ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) continues to focus its efforts on South Asia for recruitment and publishes content in local languages. Finally, al-Qa'ida retains close ties with a variety of militant and terrorist elements that threaten U.S. interests including the Taliban and Haqqani Network, as well as Syria-based Hurras al-Din, which includes several al-Qa'ida veterans and allies among its ranks.

Iran, Lebanese Hizballah, and other Shia Extremist Groups

As our efforts to defeat Islamist extremist groups continue, we face an expanding and intensifying confrontation with Iran and its extremist allies, most notably Lebanese Hizballah. Iran threatens us through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF), which serves as Tehran's primary terrorist support arm, and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). In addition to providing terrorists with material and financial support, these organizations maintain robust networks responsible for planning and executing assassinations and terrorist attacks targeting Iran's enemies. Just this year, Iranian diplomats and suspected operatives have been apprehended in several European countries for their alleged involvement in attack planning against dissident groups. In addition, the arrest in August of two Iranian citizens in the Homeland who were collecting intelligence on perceived enemies of the regime is

indicative of Tehran's aggressive overseas operations. We continue to work with a wide range of partners to arrest Iranian-linked operatives, target their finances, and preempt their operations.

In Lebanon, Hizballah maintains a large conventional force armed with sophisticated weaponry that threatens U.S. interests and allies in the region, particularly Israel. In Syria, the group has deployed thousands of its fighters in recent years to prop up the Asad regime, advancing Tehran's interests and providing its fighters with valuable battlefield experience. Hizballah maintains a formidable global terrorist network that reaches into Europe, Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Homeland, with several operatives arrested in recent years for conducting operational activities including the surveillance of Israeli tourists and preparations for terrorist attacks.

In addition to Hizballah, Iran backs and exercises varying levels of control over terrorist and militant proxies in Iraq, Bahrain, Syria, Yemen, and the Palestinian territories, providing them with weapons and training that enable them to subvert U.S. allies and further destabilize the region. Last month, Iran-backed Iraqi Shia militants launched rockets against the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad's International Zone and the U.S. Consulate in Al Basrah.

Key Factors Influencing the Terrorist Threat Trajectory

The resolution of a number of key uncertainties will influence the trajectory of global terrorism in the coming years. These include:

- ***Post-ISIS landscape in Iraq and Syria***—ISIS's ability to reconstitute its networks in Iraq and Syria will rely heavily on its success in exploiting the grievances and disenfranchisement of local Sunni civilians. We judge the prospects for the group's revival would be limited if local governments could deliver economic and reconstruction assistance in areas liberated from ISIS, invite Sunni political participation, and restrain corrupt or sectarian paramilitary forces. We will continue to work with our coalition partners to prevent ISIS's resurgence, including through shared military efforts and civilian partnerships.

- ***The foreign fighter threat***—We also remain concerned by the threat posed by the tens of thousands of foreign extremists who have traveled to Syria since 2012, with many going on to receive training and substantial military experience. Some of these individuals have since returned to their countries of origin, posing an enduring security, resource, and repatriation challenge for local governments. Many others remain in Iraq and Syria, and we are closely monitoring for indications of whether some might move to alternate conflict zones as the conflict in Syria ebbs. We are seeing signs that foreign fighters are utilizing smugglers to help them move out of the conflict zone.

- ***Resonance of ideology***—Regarding the spread of terrorist ideology—particularly its promise to remove Western influence through violence and install Islamic extremist governance—it continues to attract adherents. Terrorists continue to exploit these themes

and other ingrained grievances including anti-Americanism, perceived disenfranchisement, and the declining legitimacy of political orders to attract and motivate supporters.

- ***Network cohesion***—Although the United States and our partners have enjoyed success in degrading the leadership ranks of both ISIS and al-Qa'ida, both groups retain powerful and cohesive global networks. The bonds between these networks and their central hubs are sustained by personal ties between key figures, the exchange and sharing of resources, media fronts that promote and reinforce shared themes, and a common vision of jihad. CT efforts that target these linkages can diminish connectivity within global terrorist enterprises, but longer-lasting, systematic degradation will likely require sustained and multipronged CT efforts.

Challenges

In closing let me highlight several challenges related first to the nature of the threat; second to our ability to analyze that threat; and third our ability to address the threat.

- ***Terrorist Exploitation of Technology and the Attributes of Globalization***

Contributing to the increasing fluidity and volatile nature of the terrorist threat is the relationship between terrorists and emerging technology. Terrorist groups have proven adept at pairing innovative technologies with their operational and plotting efforts. We are particularly concerned by their ongoing and future weaponization of more secure forms of communication, social media, unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), and weapons of mass destruction.

Many terrorist groups are leveraging modern communications technology and social media to facilitate recruitment, radicalization, and mobilization of individuals to violence and maintain global support even if they are degraded within their primary areas of operation. These organizations have also proven adept at circumventing corporate security measures, which allows them to remain connected to external allies and supporters despite technology companies' increasing determination to mitigate the threat.

In addition, an increasing number of terrorist organizations are making use of UAS for reconnaissance and surveillance, and we believe the use of this technology for kinetic operations will only grow. Recent UAS attacks in Syria against a Russian air base and in Venezuela targeting leadership figures highlight the destructive potential of increasingly sophisticated unmanned vehicles, heightening our concern that such devices could be employed against U.S. targets, including in the Homeland.

The threat of terrorists using chemical and biological weapons against U.S. and Western interests is the highest it has ever been. ISIS's use of chemical weapons on the battlefield has probably made chemical weapons more acceptable and familiar to extremists. Terrorists are also promoting methods to use simple biological poisons and toxic chemicals that are within the

capabilities of many operatives. During the last 18 months, security services have disrupted extremist plots to make some of these materials, including ricin and a toxic gas, in Western countries. The threat remains despite disruptions to specific plots, because extremists have proliferated instructions for several dangerous chemical and biological substances online.

- ***Data Challenges Associated with Addressing the Threat***

In the years since 9/11, the CT community has continued to improve both information sharing and data processing in the defense of the country. Whether sharing to support operations, analysis, or watchlisting and screening—the result has been that the CT community is better integrated than any other part of the national security apparatus. Nevertheless, information sharing is a journey, not a destination, and we will always need to address existing and new challenges.

Currently, the sheer amount of available data we must analyze continues to grow. The reporting available to the National Counterterrorism Center exceeds 10,000 terrorism-related messages a day—a roughly five-fold increase since the early days of the Center—and these messages represent a very small share of the relevant information available to the CT community; one impact of this expansion of information can be seen in the fact that our terrorist identities database (TIDE - Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment) has grown by well over an order of magnitude since 9/11. Maintaining such a database is resource intensive.

The growth in social media and captured media has dramatically increased the information sharing and processing challenges confronting the community. Analysts alone cannot process all available information. Instead, today we must consider how we format our data—much of which is neither standardized nor structured—so that tomorrow we can better use technological solutions, including artificial intelligence and machine learning, to process that data.

Similarly, a host of competing equities affect our ability to efficiently process information. Datasets collected under different authorities are often not easily comingled to enable technology to find linkages. Likewise, no analyst in the government has access to all lawfully collected information relevant to their analytic discipline—a result of the legal, policy, privacy, security, and technical equities associated with information. We must continue to work to address the difficult questions associated with the varied datasets as we move forward.

The nature of the threat also has complicated some specific data sharing and processing issues. The 9/11 hijackers operated under their own names, but terrorists increasingly have access to fake identity papers and passports. As such, the government needs to move beyond the simple sharing and screening of name-based, biographic information and move to biometrically based screening. Operational relevance will require that any screener or operator anywhere should be able to check both biographic and biometric data and receive a return from U.S. Government repositories in near-real time. Not only will this be a computationally challenging proposition, it will require vast improvements in collecting, processing, sharing, and using biometric data.

- ***Increased Need for Non-Kinetic Approaches to Address the Threat***

Shortly after 9/11, we invested heavily in kinetic activities, which have played a key role in preventing a large-scale attack within the United States by a foreign terrorist organization. In al-Qa'ida, we faced a terrorist group that prioritized attacks against the West, and our kinetic actions substantially degraded its ability to conduct external operations. We were similarly effective in using the military to remove many of those terrorists in other groups, such as ISIS, who were threatening our interests or were intent on attacking the United States.

There will be a continued need for kinetic operations; however, we assess that kinetic operations alone will be insufficient to defeat terrorist groups that continue to hijack legitimate political, socioeconomic, and religious grievances of specific populations to advance their own ends.

To achieve durable results, to reduce terrorism incidents, the new National Strategy for Counterterrorism recognizes that we must prioritize a broader range of non-military capabilities to build societal resilience to terrorism and blunt the ability of terrorist groups to radicalize and recruit individuals. As the new strategy highlights, this will require a wide range of partnerships, including working with like-minded countries, to fund micro initiatives at the community level to redirect those who join terrorist groups for economic reasons or to promote reconciliation among disputing factions. In doing so, we must be far more entrepreneurial in funding pilot programs to test what works. We also need to demonstrate more patience as we seek to resolve underlying conditions that are often slow to change.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for allowing me to share with you the National Counterterrorism Center's latest assessments, I look forward to the Committee's questions.