

Statement of Ranking Member Tom Carper
“The Impact of ISIS on the Homeland and Refugee Resettlement”

Thursday, November 19, 2015

As prepared for delivery:

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

First off, I want to express my deepest sympathies to the people of France. France is our oldest ally, and we mourn with them as they bury their countrymen.

The tragedy in Paris is yet another reminder that ISIS, Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups have no regard for innocent civilians and will stop at nothing to terrorize the West and our core values of freedom, democracy and respect for human life.

I want to commend the French people for their stoicism in the face of the attacks, and French and Belgian authorities for their valiant work in the days since. Their bravery and hard work has already apprehended or killed some of the terrorists, and quite possibly averted follow-on attacks.

We have also seen encouraging progress in the larger fight to dismantle and degrade ISIS. Here at home, it is our job, the job of DHS, the FBI and the Intelligence Community to make sure that these kinds of attacks do not happen on US soil. The good news is that we have made it very hard for ISIS to do this.

Over the past year, the FBI has arrested more than two dozen individuals on ISIS-related terrorism charges. DHS screens every single airline passenger coming to the United States and checks their data against our terrorism watchlist long before they ever get on a plane.

Over the past year DHS’s intelligence office—in partnership with the FBI—has issued dozens of intelligence reports to state and local law enforcement units throughout the country about ISIS. These reports give them the information they need to know what it is that ISIS may be trying to do and to take the steps necessary to protect their communities. One report even warned about the capabilities of the alleged mastermind of the Paris attacks – the man we now know was killed in yesterday’s pre-dawn raid by French authorities outside Paris.

Lastly, DHS has set up a new Countering Violent Extremism office charged with reaching out to select communities across the country to alert them to the dangers of ISIS. This office will help families, community leaders and religious figures understand ISIS’s online recruitment and radicalization tactics. It will also help young people resist the lure of joining the ranks of ISIS and al Qaeda.

We can of course always do more. But make no mistake, we have a multi layered and effective homeland security system in place. Our borders are strong, our law enforcement officers remain vigilant, and our intelligence community is working around the clock to sniff out the next attack.

With that said, I now want to take a moment to talk about Syrian refugees. A couple of months ago, on the other side of the Capitol, we had a visit from Pope Francis. I'm not Catholic, but I was moved. I know a lot of our colleagues were moved, too, especially when the Pope invoked the Golden Rule. He called on all of us to treat other people the way we want to be treated.

We were also moved when he invoked the words of Matthew 25: 'When I was hungry, did you feed me; when I was naked, did you clothe me; when I was thirsty, did you give me drink; when I was a stranger in your land, did you take me in?'

Let me repeat that last part: 'when I was a stranger in your land, did you take me in?'

When I hear that roughly a thousand Syrian refugees came to this country in the past year and more are coming next year, I think of the desperate plight of so many people who are trying to escape a hellacious situation in Syria. They've been living, in some cases, for months or even years in refugee camps. They've watched friends or family members suffer or die on the battlefield, at the hands of terrorists, and even on the route to safety as well.

What happened in Paris, however, has many people asking questions about whether our country should be accepting Syrian refugees.

From my perspective, we have two competing moral imperatives that should drive us in this situation. On the one hand, we have an obligation to care for 'the least of these.' And on the other hand, we have an obligation to protect those of us who live here from possible threats that might be caused by individuals fleeing the violence in Syria.

It may seem as if these moral imperatives are in conflict, that we can't both help the desperate Syrians we've seen and read about in the media without putting ourselves in danger. I understand the concern, but I don't believe that is the case.

"I think this Administration has worked hard to make sure that we can continue to welcome refugees with open arms while also keeping our citizens safe from terrorist groups like ISIS. The Administration has put in place a robust screening process for Syrian refugees - which we will hear about today.

It usually starts with the United Nations winnowing down the pool of refugees after gathering extensive biometric data and background information on the applicants. Only those individuals who pass the U.N. assessment are ever referred to the United States for possible resettlement.

At that point, federal agencies at the Department of Homeland Security and elsewhere begin a lengthy and intensive screening process, all conducted outside of our borders. Refugees are finger-printed, photographed, and vetted against all of the national security databases we maintain in search of any hint of terrorist ties or any other criminal or nefarious activity in their background.

Each refugee is then interviewed face-to-face by highly skilled immigration analysts who undergo special training to spot inconsistencies in information or attempts by someone to conceal their true identity in some way. After then going through a health screening, the refugees are subjected to another security check and are re-vetted against U.S. national security databases.

All this happens well before any of these applicants ever set foot on U.S. soil. On average, the screening process here in the U.S. takes a year and a half. Let me repeat that. For the U.S. to conduct its review, refugees must wait out 18 months or more of screening.

That's a long time to wait and a lot of hurdles that a member of ISIS would have to clear if they were going to try to use the refugee program to get to the United States.

So we need to take a step back, tune out the hysteria, and identify some common sense steps we can take to advance both our obligation to provide safe harbor to the victims of war, and our obligation to keep Americans safe.

I think we have a very experienced group of witnesses before us today who can help us have a productive dialogue on these issues.

Thank you to you all and I look forward to hearing your testimony.