

**“Jihad 2.0: Social Media in the Next Evolution of  
Terrorist Recruitment”**

**Testimony for the U.S. Senate Committee on  
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs**

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This testimony is divided into eight sections.

- the first examines who the Americans involved in Syrian militancy are;
- the second, how these Americans were recruited;
- the third will try and answer the question of why these Americans are being recruited;
- the fourth will assess the true level of threat posed by American fighters returning from Syria;
- the fifth will analyze the threat from those “homegrown” militants who are inspired by Syrian militant groups;
- the sixth will examine the threat to American interests posed by militants from other Western countries fighting in Syria;
- the seventh will examine the climate of fear surrounding the perceived ISIS threat to the States; and
- the final section will discuss what can be done to mitigate the terrorist threats that are considered in this testimony.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Who are the Americans recruited by militant groups in Syria?

One of the fundamental challenges facing law enforcement about ferreting out which Americans are being drawn to the Syrian conflict is that they fit no profile. Those accused of being involved in Syria-related militancy include Joshua Van Haften, a 34-year-old white man and registered sex offender from Wisconsin, Hoda Muthana, a 20-year-old Alabama woman from a Yemeni-American family who is using social media from Syria to radicalize and recruit others, and Tairod Pugh, a 47-year old African-American convert to Islam who once served in the Air Force.<sup>1</sup> Among the 62 American citizens and residents who have been identified by researchers at New America as being involved in Syria-related militancy there is no ethnic profile – they are Caucasian, Somali-American, Vietnamese-American, Bosnian-American, and Arab-American, among other ethnicities and nationalities. Strangely, and perhaps surprisingly absent from those who have gone to fight for ISIS or al-Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, the Nusra Front, are Syrian-Americans, except for one individual.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> **Thanks to David Sterman of New America for his help in preparing this testimony, and Emily Schneider and Courtney Schuster of New America for their work on research that also contributed to it.**

<sup>2</sup> The one individual is a South Carolinian teen from a Syrian-American family whose name is not public because he is a juvenile. He was convicted of a gun charge and prosecutors said he intended to join ISIS and conduct an attack inside the United States before leaving. For more see Dys, Andrew. “York teen sent to juvenile prison after plotting to join ISIS, kill American soldiers.” Charlotte Observer. 4/21/2015.

<http://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/article19155336.html#storylink=cpy>

This is in sharp contrast to an earlier wave of jihadist recruitment from the States that began in 2007 in which a cohort of U.S. militants were drawn to the Somalia civil war and fought alongside the Somali terrorist group, Al-Shabaab. Those militants were overwhelmingly Somali-Americans, most of whom were from Minnesota.

By contrast, Americans drawn to the militant groups fighting in the Syrian conflict hail from all over the United States. According to FBI Director James Comey, the FBI is investigating cases in all 50 states.<sup>2</sup> Indeed among the 62 individuals in the United States that New America has identified in public records or news accounts who tried to join militant groups in Syria such as ISIS or Nusra, or have succeeded in joining such groups, or have helped others to join such groups were residents of 19 states: Alabama, Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

The majority of those involved are, no surprise, men since jihadist terrorism has in the past overwhelmingly been a male domain, but more than one in five of the 62 Americans involved in Syria-related militant activity are women – an unprecedented development. Women were rarely, present, if at all, among jihadists in previous holy wars in Afghanistan against the Soviets, in Bosnia against the Serbs, and the initial insurgency in Iraq against the U.S.-led occupation more than a decade ago.

Many of the Americans drawn to the Syrian conflict are young. One quarter are teenagers – including five teenage girls, the youngest of whom was 15. On average, New America found that the individuals involved in Syrian militancy are 25.

## **2. How are the Americans drawn to militant groups in Syria being recruited?**

We have seen several models of terrorist recruitment inside the United States. The stereotypical view of how al-Qaeda recruitment occurs is that an al-Qaeda operative arrives from overseas to the United States and physically recruits a group of American militants. This form of recruitment is, in fact, quite rare. The Lackawanna Six were one such case. They were a group of six Yemeni-Americans living in the small, decaying Rust Belt town of Lackawanna, New York where they had grown up as American as a Big Mac. But in 2000 they fell under the spell of Kamal Derwish, a charismatic, deeply religious, fellow Yemeni-American, who told them stirring tales of derring-do about his role in the early-1990s war between the Bosnian Muslims and Serbs. Over late night bull sessions fueled by pizza, Derwish, who was a member of al-Qaeda, along with Juma Dosari, another al-Qaeda recruiter, led the group of very ordinary men – telemarketers, delivery men, and car salesman – in discussions about the plight of Muslims around the world; gradually they came to embrace a militant form of Islam.<sup>3</sup> Derwish eventually

persuaded the six men that they should go to Afghanistan to see the Taliban in action and deepen their commitment to jihad by attending training camps there.

Derwish and his buddies traveled to Afghanistan in two groups during the spring and summer of 2001. At one of al-Qaeda's Afghan training camps the men trained on M16 rifles, RPGs, and AK-47s. Eventually almost all of the Yemeni-Americans returned home to Lackawanna. It was their bad luck that in the spring of 2002, a handwritten, anonymous letter arrived at the FBI office in Buffalo, which led to their investigation and imprisonment.

A second model is a militant group that forms around a charismatic leader such as a radical cleric or a returning fighter from an overseas jihad. An example of this was a group of young Somali-American men recruited in Minnesota to fight for Al-Shabaab in Somalia who coalesced around Caabdullahi Faarax. Faarax had returned from fighting in Somalia in 2007 to Minneapolis in order to recruit fighters.<sup>4</sup>

The militants drawn to Syria are not radicalizing in prisons. Indeed there is only one clear example of prison radicalization inside the United States since 9/11: a small group of prisoners led by Kevin Lamar James, an African-American convert to Islam, formed a cell dedicated to holy war while they were jailed in California's Folsom prison. James' crew planned to attack a U.S. military recruiting station in Los Angeles on the fourth anniversary of 9/11 as well as a synagogue a month later during Yom Kippur. Members of the group financed their activities by sticking up gas stations, and their plans only came to light during the course of a routine investigation of a gas station robbery by police in Torrance, California who found documents that laid out the group's plans for jihadist mayhem.<sup>5</sup> New America examined the cases of 288 jihadist militants in the United States accused of jihadist terrorism since 9/11 and found that despite a great deal of hyperventilation about the putative dangers posed by "prison radicalization" in American jails, only three of those militants, Kevin James, Levar Washington, and Gregory Patterson, can be said to have clearly radicalized in a U.S. prison.<sup>3</sup>

The only profile that ties together American militants drawn to the Syrian conflict is that they are active in online jihadist circles. More than eight out of ten of the 62 individuals New America identified as involved in Syria-related militancy – with either ISIS or the al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front – were active in online jihadist circles. This is something of a boon for law

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<sup>3</sup> For another six individuals accused of terrorism related activity there has been limited reporting that they may have radicalized in prison or that they reportedly spent time in jail or prison and the reporting regarding their radicalization is at too early a stage to make a determination. However, in other cases reports have often misidentified individuals as having radicalized in prison when they in fact did not. The six individuals are Farah Mohamed Beledi, Donald Ray Morgan, Michael Finton, Ruben Shumpert, Alton Nolen, and Joshua Van Haften.

enforcement as many of these militants are prolific posters on publicly available social media, which it is perfectly legal for the FBI and police departments to monitor.

Militants in the United States today radicalize after reading and interacting with propaganda online and have little or no physical interaction with other extremists. This trend has been going on for the past several years. Major Nidal Hasan, for instance, who killed 13 at Fort Hood, Texas in 2009, appears to have radicalized largely through reading militant propaganda online. As an active officer in the U.S. military, there was, of course, little opportunity for him to physically meet with fellow militants.

Social media has dramatically accelerated this trend. Of the 62 individual cases that New America examined there were no clear cases of physical recruitment by a militant operative, radical cleric or returning foreign fighter or radicalization while in prison. All of the recruitment happened online, taking the form either of self-recruitment or in some cases direct contact over the Internet with members of ISIS or Nusra. This is not to say that there are no similarities with older models of recruitment. For example, Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud of Ohio remained in contact with his brother who fought with Nusra before he allegedly left for Syria himself to fight with Nusra.<sup>6</sup> Similarly the complaint filed this year against six Minnesota men charged with trying to join ISIS reveals that they were in contact with Abdi Nur, another member of their group, after he had successfully reached Syria.<sup>7</sup> However, even in these cases, which are exceptions to the rule, the radicalization process resembles radicalization via social media far more than radicalization in person.

In a more representative case in the late summer of 2014 19-year-old Mohammed Hamzah Khan of suburban Chicago purchased three airline tickets for flights from Chicago to Istanbul for himself and his 17-year old sister and 16-year-old brother (who have not be named publicly because they were minors). Khan met someone online who had provided him with the number of a contact to call once he had landed in Istanbul who would help to get him and his siblings to the Turkish-Syrian border, and from there on to a region occupied by ISIS. His sister planned to marry an ISIS fighter, while Khan planned to serve in the group's police force. Before leaving, Khan wrote a three-page letter to his parents explaining why he was leaving Chicago to join ISIS. He told them that ISIS had established the perfect Islamic state and that he felt obligated to "migrate" there. The three teenagers planned to meet up with the shadowy ISIS recruiter they had met online, known as Abu Qa'qa, and travel with him, most likely to ISIS headquarters in Raqqa, Syria. They didn't make it. FBI agents arrested Khan and his two siblings at O'Hare airport in early October 2014.

There is no evidence that Khan planned to any act of terrorism in the United States or elsewhere and he failed in his goal of reaching ISIS, but he faces up to fifteen years in prison for allegedly

*attempting* to provide “material support” in the shape of his own *potential* “services” to the terrorist group.

### 3. **What is the attraction for the Americans drawn to militant groups fighting in the Syrian war?**

Why would the Khan teenagers, from a comfortable, middle-class family in Chicago, be drawn to Syria and to ISIS? Some answers to that question can be found in ISIS’ English webzine, *Dabiq*. In *Dabiq*'s first issue, which debuted in July 2014, the magazine declared that a “new era has arrived” for Muslims. *Dabiq* is the name of a town in Syria now controlled by ISIS where the final battle between Islam and Rome (the West) is supposed to be fought, according to a *hadith*, one of the sayings of the Prophet Mohammed.<sup>8</sup>

Photographs in the webzine of ISIS militants in American armored vehicles rolling through Iraq seemed to buttress that claim. Graphic photos of dead soldiers from Iraqi forces litter the pages of each of the issues of *Dabiq*. The magazines are also, unsurprisingly, highly sectarian, repeatedly showing images of Shia shrines and tombs, which ISIS believes to be idolatrous, that they had blown up by ISIS. Iraqi Army soldiers – who are generally Shia – are referred to as “apostates” and graphic photos of their executions by ISIS fighters are a staple of the magazine. With these actions, ISIS members fervently believe that they had established a true “caliphate” in the areas that they control, a supposed replication of the perfect Islamic rule of the Prophet Mohammed and his immediate successors in the seventh century. Indeed, ISIS declared a caliphate after it had seized much of northern Iraq in June 2014, an act of chutzpah that not even Osama bin Laden had ever contemplated.

Other articles in *Dabiq* aimed to reassure readers that ISIS is an actual state that provides social services and constructs infrastructure. The magazine asserted that administrators govern towns after the main ISIS fighting force moves on. One issue of *Dabiq* included photos with captions showing “services for Muslims,” including street cleaning, electricity repairs, care homes for the elderly, and cancer treatment centers for children.<sup>9</sup> The first issue of *Dabiq* even had a sort of classified ad for “all Muslim doctors, engineers, scholars, and specialists” to come and join ISIS. ISIS also went to great lengths to highlight how *normal* life was in its Islamist utopia releasing, for instance, a video in March 2015 that showed smiling kids taking fairground rides at the Dijla city fairground, near Mosul.

ISIS propaganda, in its various English language online publications and videos, all broadcasted on social media helped to answer the big question: Why would anyone in the United States want to give up their comfortable lives to join ISIS? The answer for ISIS’ recruits was some combination of the need to belong to something that they believed was greater than them. It is an idealistic belief that motivates many young people who go on to join the Marines or the Peace

Corps. In the minds of ISIS' recruits, the group is doing something that is of *cosmic importance* that is sanctioned by Allah: defending Sunni Muslim civilians from the terrible onslaughts of the Assad regime, which has not hesitated to use chemical weapons in its war against its own people. At the same time, ISIS is creating what its recruits believe to be a perfect Islamic state, restoring the Caliphate that ceased to exist after the end of World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire – an act that means that every Sunni Muslim should come to its aid. And ISIS is even presenting itself as the vanguard of Muslim warriors who will usher in the End of Times and the final, inevitable battle between the West and Muslims, which presages the arrival of the *Mahdi*, the savior of Islam and the triumph of Islam over all its enemies including the West.

ISIS also presents itself as literally creating a real state with plentiful social services and a place where pious, young Muslim men and women from around the Islamic world can gather and even find their perfect marriage partner. For its Western recruits, there is also something glamorous and even exciting about leaving behind their humdrum lives in the West to join ISIS.

#### **4. What is the true level of threat posed by American fighters returning from Syria?**

Four years into the Syrian civil war, little evidence has emerged to support the notion that returning fighters from Syria pose a great threat to the United States. To date, there has been only one deadly attack in the West from a fighter returning from Syria – the May 24, 2014 shooting at a Jewish museum in Brussels, Belgium by Medhi Nemmouche, a 29-year-old Frenchman – that killed four people.<sup>10</sup> In the United States, there has only been one case of a fighter returning and allegedly plotting an attack. Speaking at the Council on Foreign Relations in March, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper said that about 40 individuals had returned from Syria, and: “We have since found they went for humanitarian purposes or some other reason that don't relate to plotting.”<sup>11</sup> In comparison, New America recorded four deadly acts of political violence – killing eight people – inside the United States by extremists with anti-government or racist political views in 2014 alone.<sup>12</sup>

In order to assess the threat posed to the United States by fighters returning from Iraq or Syria, New America collected information on 62 U.S. citizens or residents who have reportedly gone to fight in Syria and Iraq, attempted to do so, or provided support to others who went. Our review of these 62 cases suggests that the threat is worrisome but far from existential, and U.S. law enforcement has generally done a good job of containing it.

Of the 62 reported cases, we identified only 19 involved individuals who actually reached Syria. 31 attempted to travel to Syria but were unsuccessful in doing so, and 12 provided support to others fighting in Syria.

Far from being a launch pad for attacks at home, Syria turned out to be a graveyard for several of the Americans who traveled to fight there. Of the 19 individuals who reached Syria, eight died there. One American, Moner Abu Salha, died conducting a suicide bombing in northern Syria.<sup>13</sup> Douglas McArthur McCain was killed fighting for ISIS.<sup>14</sup> A third American, Abdirahman Muhumed, reportedly also died fighting with ISIS.<sup>15</sup>

Given the high casualty rate in Syria, stopping Americans from a quite-likely death after they are lured to Syria by often predatory online ISIS recruiters may be a significant justification for focusing resources on this issue, in addition to the more obvious goal of preventing an attack in the United States by a returning fighter.

Eight of the Americans who reached Syria remain at large.

Four American fighters returned to the United States from Syria, three of whom were taken into custody and one of whom returned to Syria where he conducted a suicide operation. Eric Harroun returned to the United States after discussions with American officials.<sup>16</sup> He was arrested and charged with providing material support and conspiring to use rocket propelled grenades that he claimed to have fired in Syria.<sup>17</sup> In a second case, Sinh Vinh Ngo Nguyen, who had returned from Syria where he fought with Nusra, al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, was arrested in an informant-led operation and pled guilty to a terrorism charge in December 2013.<sup>18</sup> Another fighter, Moner Abu Salha, who also fought with Nusra, returned to the United States before leaving again for Syria, where he died conducting a suicide attack. The fourth returnee, Abdirahman Sheik Mohamud, a 23-year old Ohio man, is the only case of a returning fighter accused of plotting a terrorist attack in the United States upon his return.

Much remains unclear about Abidrahman Sheik Mohamud's case complicating efforts to determine how serious the alleged plot was. Court documents in the case allege that Mohamud exchanged communications with his brother Abdifatah Aden, who left in May 2013 for Syria where he later died fighting for Nusra. On April 18, 2014, Mohamud left the United States and fought in Syria before returning to the United States on or about June 8, 2014.<sup>19</sup> The indictment alleges that a cleric in Nusra told Mohamud that he should return to the United States to conduct an act of terrorism.<sup>20</sup> The indictment further alleges that Mohamud discussed a desire to kill three or four American soldiers execution-style at a military base in Texas.<sup>21</sup> He reportedly also went to a firing range to practice shooting though his defense attorney says there is no evidence that he sought to stockpile weapons.<sup>22</sup> Mohamud came to the government's attention more than one year ago before he left for Syria and the FBI tried to intervene to prevent him from traveling overseas.<sup>23</sup> After his return, he was monitored by an informant, leading to his arrest.<sup>24</sup> In addition, the owner of the gun range where he practiced shooting reportedly provided a tip to the police.<sup>25</sup>



Rather than being an easy target for returning fighters, the United States benefits from a series of layered defenses that make returning and plotting a sophisticated attack undetected quite difficult. It takes more than a plane ticket for a returning fighter to conduct a sophisticated attack: they also have to gather arms, conduct surveillance, and carry out the attack undetected.<sup>26</sup> This is difficult as Muslim communities have often reported suspicious activity and law enforcement has instituted an aggressive effort using informants and other investigative tools to prevent such an occurrence. According to New America's data, Muslim communities and family members have provided tips in about 30 percent of the 288 jihadist terrorism related cases since 9/11, and in about 8 percent of cases, other individuals have reported suspicious activity.<sup>27</sup> Almost half of the 288 individuals accused of jihadist terrorism-related crimes since 9/11 have been monitored by an informant.<sup>28</sup> Even in the case of Moner Abusalha, which is certainly not a success story given his return undetected to the United States after training with an al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, when he started to try and recruit Americans to go to Syria, a tip put him on the government's radar.<sup>29</sup>

A side-note that is worth considering regarding the cases of Abusalha and Mohamud, the two returnee cases that are the most worrisome regarding the threat posed inside the United States, is that both were affiliated with Nusra, the Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate, and not with ISIS. While ISIS' recruiting may dominate the headlines – it is not the only militant group in Syria that poses a potential threat to the United States.

In assessing the threat posed by returning American fighters, it is worth putting the current Syrian conflict into historical perspective. The historical comparison most people are aware of is the Afghan war against the Soviets and the ensuing civil war, which helped launch bin Laden's al-Qaeda.

Though an important cautionary tale, much has changed since then that makes it a weak comparison for how "blowback" from foreign jihads might affect Western countries.<sup>30</sup> For example, on 9/11, there were 16 people on the U.S. "no fly" list.<sup>31</sup> Today, there are more than 40,000 people.<sup>32</sup> In 2001, there were 32 Joint Terrorism Task Force "fusion centers," where multiple law enforcement agencies work together to chase down leads and build terrorism cases.<sup>33</sup> Now there are 104 centers.<sup>34</sup> A decade ago, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, National Counterterrorism Center, Transportation Security Administration, Northern Command, and Cyber Command didn't exist. In 2014, all of these new post-9/11 institutions make it much harder for terrorists to operate in the United States. The U.S. intelligence budget also grew dramatically after 9/11, with Congress giving the government substantial resources with which to improve its counterterrorism capabilities. In 2013, the United States allocated \$72 billion to intelligence collection and other covert activities.<sup>35</sup> Before 9/11, the budget was around one third of that figure: \$26 billion.<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps of most relevance to the issue of returning fighters is that prior to 9/11, the law enforcement community demonstrated little interest in investigating or prosecuting individuals who traveled abroad to fight in an overseas jihad.<sup>37</sup> Today, as demonstrated by this hearing, the government considers such persons to be a concern and attempts to track their activities. Many analysts, myself included, predicted “blowback” and attacks in the West after the insurgency in Iraq first took off in 2003 and thousands of foreign fighters flooded into Iraq, yet that blowback, at least in the West, never materialized.<sup>38</sup>

A post-9/11 American fighter flow to jihadist groups abroad that sparked fears but turned out not to be a real threat to the United States was Al-Shabaab’s recruitment of American fighters to wage war in Somalia. According to a review by New America, no American fighter who fought in the conflict in Somalia returned to plot an attack in the United States.<sup>39</sup> Instead, about one third of the individuals known to have traveled to fight in Somalia died there, either as suicide bombers or on the battlefield, while others were taken into custody upon their return.<sup>40</sup>

There are, however, worrisome cases of returning militants to the United States since 9/11 that attempted serious attacks. The United States’ experience with Americans fighting or training in Afghanistan and Pakistan provides an illustration of what a more serious returnee threat might look like. Najibullah Zazi, Adis Medunjanin, and Zarein Ahmedzay, who all grew up in New York City, traveled to Pakistan, where they ended up receiving training from al-Qaeda, and were sent back to the United States where they were part of a serious plot to bomb the New York City subway in the fall of 2009.<sup>41</sup> On May 1, 2010, Connecticut-based Faisal Shahzad, who was trained in bomb-making techniques in Pakistan by the Pakistani Taliban, left a car bomb undetected in New York City’s Times Square that failed to properly explode.<sup>42</sup>

Given the presence of senior al-Qaeda figures in Syria, and Moner Abu Salha’s undetected return to the United States, Americans trained by Nusra could be a threat to the United States. Al-Qaeda operatives from Pakistan closely connected to Nusra and known as the Khorasan group are a particular problem. While there is plenty of evidence that much of the focus of Syrian militant groups is on the war in Syria, the Khorasan group is interested in carrying out attacks in the West. Leaders within the group have ties with members of al-Qaeda’s Yemeni affiliate, which attempted to bring down a U.S. airliner over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009, and Western officials are concerned that they could pull off an attack on an American or Western passenger jet.<sup>43</sup>

##### **5. The ‘Foreign Fighter’ Threat from other Western countries.**

Many fighters from countries other than the United States have traveled to fight in Syria and could pose a potential threat to the United States. So far we have not seen a case of a foreign fighter from another country traveling to the United States to conduct an attack, however, it is

not beyond the realm of possibility. Since 9/11, two of the most serious al-Qaeda plots against the United States have been infiltration attacks from abroad – the 2001 attempt to bring down a U.S. airliner by British “shoe bomber” Richard Reid and the 2009 Christmas Day bombing attempt of another U.S. airliner by Nigerian “underwear bomber” Umar Farouk Abdulmuttalab.

The large number of foreign fighters traveling to fight in Syria from other countries magnifies the potential threat of an infiltration attack. In February 2015, the United States assessed that there are 20,000 foreign fighters from 90 different countries who have traveled to Syria.<sup>44</sup> Of particular concern is the large number of fighters who traveled to Syria from Western countries – many of which the United States includes among the countries with “visa-waiver” status so they can enter the United States relatively easily. The U.S. government estimates that there are 3,400 fighters from Western countries who have fought in Syria. In December 2014, French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve said 1,200 individuals from France are involved or have been involved in the Syrian war, 60 of whom are dead and 185 of whom have returned to France.<sup>45</sup> British officials say 700 British citizens have gone to Syria, about half of whom have returned to the United Kingdom.<sup>46</sup>

Tracking the many foreign fighters from Western countries that have gone to Syria and that have returned to the West poses a greater challenge given their larger numbers than tracking the handful of returning American fighters.

## **6. The ISIS-inspired homegrown threat.**

Acts of violence by individuals inspired by but with no direct connection to the terrorist groups in Syria pose a more immediate challenge than attacks by returning fighters from Syria. As FBI Director James Comey noted in September 2014 while referring to the December 2013 arrest of Terry Loewen, who was accused of plotting an attack on Wichita Airport in Kansas: “We have made it so hard for people to get into this country, bad guys, but they can enter as a photon and radicalize somebody in Wichita, Kansas.”<sup>47</sup> At the time, Comey also noted that ISIS lacked the capability for a sophisticated attack in the United States.<sup>48</sup>

On May 3, 2015, the United States saw its first actual attack inspired by ISIS along the lines of similar ISIS-inspired attacks in Ottawa, Copenhagen, and Paris.<sup>49</sup> Two men were killed by police after opening fire at a contest to draw cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in Garland, Texas organized by the American Freedom Defense Initiative featuring right-wing Dutch politician Geert Wilders, who had been listed on an al-Qaeda hit list. One of shooters, Elton Simpson, had previously been convicted of making a false statement to the FBI regarding plans to travel to Somalia. Before conducting the attack Simpson tweeted his allegiance to ISIS.<sup>50</sup> Simpson, a 30-year old resident of Phoenix, Arizona who was born in Illinois and converted to Islam during his

youth, was joined in the attack by his roommate Nadir Soofi, a 34-year old who was born in Garland, Texas.<sup>51</sup>

The shooting in Texas is not a lone case. While the United States has seen only one possible case of a domestic attack plot by a returned fighter from Syria, it has seen a number of alleged Syria-related plots to conduct violence that were inspired by the propaganda put out by Syrian militant groups.

- Last year, the United States charged Mufid Elfgeeh, a naturalized American citizen, with recruiting people to try and join ISIS as well as purchasing a firearm, allegedly for use in attacks on returning American soldiers.<sup>52</sup> Elfgeeh was monitored by an informant. Though he allegedly had sought to recruit people to fight in Syria, he had not gone himself.
- In January, the United States filed a criminal complaint charging Christopher Lee Cornell in relation to an alleged plot to attack the U.S. Capitol.<sup>53</sup> According to the complaint, Cornell posted material supportive of ISIS online which led to his being monitored by an informant and eventual arrest.<sup>54</sup>
- In February, the United States charged three Brooklyn men with conspiring to provide material support to ISIS, and in the complaint alleged that the men had discussed potential attacks inside the United States.<sup>55</sup> A fourth Brooklyn man was charged in April in relation to helping fund other group members' alleged plans to travel to fight in Syria.<sup>56</sup> The men were monitored by an informant.<sup>57</sup>
- In March, the United States unsealed charges against Hasan Edmonds, a 22-year-old member of the National Guard, and his cousin Jonas Edmonds alleging that Hasan Edmonds had sought to travel to fight with ISIS and that they had plotted to have Jonas Edmonds conduct an attack against a military facility.<sup>58</sup> The plot was monitored by an undercover officer.<sup>59</sup>
- In April, the United States charged John T. Booker and Alexander Blair with an alleged plot to bomb Fort Riley, in Kansas, in support of ISIS.<sup>60</sup> The two men were monitored by an informant.<sup>61</sup>
- The same month, the United States charged two New York City women, Noelle Velentzas and Asia Siddiqui, in relation to a domestic attack plot in support of ISIS.<sup>62</sup> The two women were monitored by an undercover officer.<sup>63</sup> According to the complaint, Siddiqui had regular contact with members of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>64</sup> When FBI agents arrested Velentzas and Siddiqui in Queens, they seized propane tanks, soldering tools, a pressure cooker, fertilizer, and bomb making instructions.<sup>65</sup>

In each of the above cases, the alleged plotters were monitored by an informant, which suggests that U.S. law enforcement is doing a good job of staying on top of plots as they develop. Indeed, in February, National Counterterrorism Center Director Nicholas Rasmussen stated that the

threat from terrorists “will remain at its current level resulting in fewer than 10 uncoordinated and unsophisticated plots annually from a pool of up to a few hundred individuals, most of whom are known to the IC [intelligence community] and law enforcement.”<sup>66</sup>

This is not to say that ISIS-inspired violence is not a real threat worthy of attention. The requirements for successfully organizing and conducting an act of lone wolf terrorism are much lower than they are for a directed attack from abroad by returning fighters. Individuals inspired by jihadist ideology – but not affiliated with any terrorist group such as Major Nidal Hasan and the Boston Marathon bombers – have killed 26 people in the United States since 9/11.<sup>67</sup> These deaths were tragedies, but not a national catastrophe as 9/11 was.

Finally, policymakers should take care not to “over-Syrianize” the challenge of inspired violence. It is not clear to what extent the current spate of alleged plots are caused by the Syrian conflict and to what extent the Syrian conflict is merely the cause du jour of those plotting attacks. A particularly relevant example is the alleged plot by Noelle Velentzas and Asia Siddiqi. Siddiqi was close to Samir Khan, an American who joined Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in 2006, and she had submitted a poem to *Jihad Recollections* the precursor magazine to *Inspire*, suggesting that ISIS was only the latest of many influences upon her jihadist views.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, Siddiqi had also allegedly expressed support in 2010 for Mohamud Osman Mohamud, who was convicted of plotting to bomb the Portland Christmas Tree ceremony.<sup>69</sup> Given these facts, attributing the plot to ISIS or even simply ISIS’s inspirational power rather than a broader challenge of homegrown inspired extremism risks overlooking other sources of threat.

## 7. A Climate of Fear

In March 2015, 80 percent of Americans believed that ISIS posed a very or fairly serious threat to the United States, according to CNN polling.<sup>70</sup> In September 2014, shortly before President Obama gave a speech laying out his strategy against ISIS, an NBC poll found that almost half of Americans felt the country was less safe now than before 9/11, a larger percentage than it found in September 2002, only one year after the 9/11 attacks.<sup>71</sup>

The American public has an exaggerated sense of the threat posed by fighters returning from Syria. Al-Qaeda has not conducted a successful attack inside the United States since 9/11 and the belief that ISIS poses a threat even greater than al-Qaeda at its height lacks any basis. While speaking at Brookings in September 2014 then-director of the National Counterterrorism Center, Matt Olsen, said there was no credible evidence that ISIS planned to attack the United States; that they lacked the cell structure al-Qaeda had in the 1990s; and that law enforcement had improved since the pre-9/11 era.<sup>72</sup> On February 11, 2015, Francis Taylor, under secretary of the Office of Intelligence and Analysis for the Department of Homeland Security, similarly noted: “At present, we are unaware of any specific, credible, imminent threat to the homeland.”<sup>73</sup>

Though a source of concern that needs monitoring and addressing, fighters returning from Syria do not pose a substantial threat to the United States at the moment, and the more likely threat will be from homegrown militants inspired by ISIS or other militant groups. But even in these cases, care is required not to exaggerate the threat. The threats from both returning fighters and ISIS-inspired lone wolves are worrisome, but they are far from existential.

### **What Can Be Done? Nine Action Items:**

#### **1. Assist Turkish authorities in clamping down on fighters traveling to Syria via Turkey.**

In a Nusra propaganda video released following his death conducting a suicide bombing in Syria last year, Floridian Moner Abu Salha described arriving in Turkey and meeting an al-Qaeda member who took him to a safe house and eventually sent him on into Syria.<sup>74</sup> In the video, Abu Salha said: “From tons of research I knew that mujahideen [holy warriors] come from all around the world, they come to Istanbul. I heard that the Turkey-Syrian border is close.”<sup>75</sup> Several Americans who have been arrested for trying to joining ISIS or Nusra were turned back in Turkey. These cases include Donald Morgan of North Carolina, who was stopped by Turkish authorities, and Tairod Pugh of New Jersey, who was stopped in Turkey in January allegedly trying to reach Syria.<sup>76</sup>

It is clear from a 50-page ISIS English language booklet titled *Hijrah*, which ISIS posted online in early 2015, that the organization has begun to feel some pressure from the Turkish government which has been frequently criticized by Western governments for its hitherto lackadaisical approach to controlling the flow of Syria-bound foreign fighters. ISIS explained to potential recruits from around the Muslim world: “It is important to know that the Turkish intelligence agencies are in no way friends of the Islamic State [ISIS].”

Turkish authorities should be encouraged to keep up the pressure on preventing foreign fighters transiting their country and aid should be offered by U.S. Customs and Border Protection for any technical support they may need for this purpose.

#### **2. Provide off-ramps for susceptible young Americans seduced by ISIS propaganda.**

Right now Muslim-American families who suspect a young family member may be radicalizing or attempting to join ISIS or some other militant group have an unpalatable choice to make: If they seek help from law enforcement their son or daughter can end up being arrested and charged with a crime that carries a long prison term; if they don't alert law enforcement their son or

daughter may travel to Syria where they can be easily killed in the dangerous war being waged there or they can get caught by the FBI attempting to do so and also face a long prison term.

If families felt that the U.S. government might provide some kind of mix of token prison terms; probation; counseling services and some kind supervised release to family members who were radicalizing or thinking of joining ISIS, they would be more incentivized to tell authorities about the radicalization of their loved ones. Such a deal would not be offered to anyone planning some kind of terrorist plot, but could be offered to someone like 19-year-old Mohammed Hamzah Khan of Chicago who had no plan to conduct any terrorist act anywhere but simply wanted to join what he considered to be the perfect Islamic state created by ISIS in Syria and whose case was considered earlier in this testimony.

### **3. Educate families about the risks of militant social media.**

Many parents have little understanding of social media or the siren appeal of the propaganda on social media that is put out by ISIS and other Islamist militant groups. Muslim-American leaders and clerics must speak out about this issue.

### **4. Ensure social media companies enforce their own Terms of Use.**

Social media platform such as Twitter and Facebook, which are frequently used by ISIS and other militant groups to propagate their propaganda, should be encouraged to enforce their own Terms of Use which prohibit the solicitation of violence and terminate any accounts that encourage violence. Private watchdogs like J.M. Berger (who is also testifying today) have done a good job of putting pressure on social media companies to ensure that this happens.

### **5. Crowd out bad speech with better speech.**

It is not, of course, possible to take all ISIS-related content off the Internet; the Internet is just too big. What is possible is to amplify voices with an alternative narrative about the nature of Islam as well as anti-ISIS voices. New America fellow Rabia Chaudry is a Muslim-American lawyer who works with Muslim-American community leaders and imams around the country to help them better understand how to use the Internet as a vehicle to amplify the messages of mainstream Islam. Another New America fellow, Nadia Oweidat, a Jordanian-American who has a doctorate from Oxford in Islamic thought, is collecting and aggregating Arabic language content that satirizes ISIS. Satire can be a powerful weapon to deflate ISIS' claims to be the vanguard of the new caliphate.

## **6. Counter-messages against ISIS by the U.S. government.**

The U.S. government can't engage in theological debates with ISIS because of its lack of knowledge of Islamic texts and also is hampered by a significant "kiss of death" problem, which is that the U.S. government has little credibility in key Muslim countries. But U.S. officials can point out as a matter of course that ISIS positions itself as the defender of Islam, yet its victims are overwhelmingly Muslims who don't share its ultra-fundamentalist views to the letter. This observation requires no special knowledge of Islam: It's simply a factual observation, which undercuts ISIS' principal claim that it is the defender of Muslims. The same can also be said about similar terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and its affiliates.

## **7. Amplify the stories of disillusioned militants.**

There is likely nothing more powerful to dissuade potential ISIS recruits than hearing the stories of disillusioned militants. The kind of work that former extremist Mubin Shaikh (who is also testifying today) is doing contesting ISIS' messages and engaging with radicalizing individuals is far more valuable than a bunch of nebulous meetings about Countering Violent Extremism (CVE).

## **8. Build a database of all the Western foreign fighters who have gone to Syria to fight for ISIS and Nusra.**

Recent research by a leading scholar of jihadism, Thomas Hegghammer, of previous flows of foreign fighters to other jihads found that between 1990 and 2010, one in nine Western foreign fighters subsequently became terrorists in the West.<sup>77</sup> This underlines the necessity of understanding of who exactly is fighting in Syria who is from the West.

## **9. Stay in Afghanistan beyond 2016.**

One only has to look at the debacle that has unfolded in Iraq after the withdrawal of U.S. troops at the end of 2011 to have a sneak preview of what could take place in an Afghanistan without some kind of residual American presence. Without American forces in the country, there is a strong possibility Afghanistan could host a reinvigorated Taliban allied to a reinvigorated al-Qaeda – not to mention ISIS – which is gaining a foothold in the region. Needless to say, this would be a disaster for Afghanistan. But it would also be quite damaging to U.S. interests to have some kind of resurgent al-Qaeda in the country where the group trained the hijackers for the 9/11 attacks.<sup>78</sup>

Merely because the Obama administration will be almost out the door at the end of 2016 doesn't mean that suddenly at the same time that the Taliban will lay down their arms, or that the Afghan



army will be able to fight the Taliban completely unaided. Nor does it mean that al-Qaeda – and ISIS, which is beginning to establish small cells in Afghanistan – would cease to be a threat.

This U.S. military presence in Afghanistan doesn't have to be a large, nor does it need to play a combat role, but U.S. troops should remain in Afghanistan to advise the Afghan army and provide intelligence support. Such a long-term commitment of several thousand American troops is exactly the kind of force that the Obama administration was forced to deploy to Iraq following ISIS' lightning advances there over the past year. Selling a longer-term U.S. military presence in Afghanistan would be pushing against an open door with that nation's government. Consider that within 24 hours of being installed, the new Afghan government led by President Ashraf Ghani and CEO Abdullah Abdullah signed the basing agreement that allows American troops to stay in Afghanistan until December 2016.

Consider also that the Afghan government has already negotiated a strategic partnership agreement with the United States lasting until 2024 that would provide the framework for a longer term U.S. military presence. Consider also that many Afghans see a relatively small, but long-term international troop presence as a guarantor of their stability. Keeping a relatively small, predominantly U.S. Special Forces presence in Afghanistan to continue to train the Afghan army past December 2016 is a wise policy that would benefit both Afghans and Americans.

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