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The Senate

SPECTRA

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Date: 06/21/2016

Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Carper, Members of the Committee, thank you for offering me the honor and the opportunity to be here today and to share with you my own story in the context of the larger events happening around the world and here in the United States.

My personal story mirrors the stories of many other LGBT individuals, but I am one of the few fortunate refugees who has been accepted for resettlement in the United States. I fled from my country because an organized group of militants threatened me solely because they perceived me as gay. ISIS had not yet been formed, yet militants and the regime targeted all gay men. When, after six months in Lebanon, I moved again, this time to Turkey, my history of activism in LGBT rights in Syria and Lebanon followed me.

Since extremist groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS were gaining strength and access to Turkey, once again, I found myself in danger. Although I was employed for 2 years in a senior position managing the translation department for the Turkey office of Save the Children International, I was still not safe because of my sexual identity.

A straight friend from Syria told me that I had been targeted for death, and my Save the Children Country Director helped me register with the UN Refugee Agency, to be resettled to a safer country. Because my identity placed me in a category of refugees facing particular danger, I was resettled in the U.S.

Prior to my resettlement, I had to complete a thorough screening process and consuming procedures including testifying under oath in front of an officer from the DHS, security checks, medical tests and cultural orientation. These processes took 10 months to be finalized.

In August 2015, I had the privilege to speak before members of the UN Security Council and civil society on threats to sexual minorities within the Middle East region during a historic event organized by the United States and Chile. As I stated during the meeting and in a follow-up press meeting with the United States Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power, at the present time ISIS is simply one of many threats to the LGBT community in the Middle East.

While ISIS is in the public eye as the most notorious extremist group in Syria and Iraq, it may come as a surprise that their methodology --when it comes to the treatment of LGBT people-- is similar to many other groups, including governments themselves. Government regimes in the region prescribe, at the least, harsh punishments for LGBT residents, and, at the worst, the death penalty. There is no haven for LGBT people in Syria, even for young gay men that ISIS uses as sex slaves.

We know that many groups, including ISIS, target and kill gay people in Syria. The only difference is the method of killing they use. Good fortune has allowed me to begin a new, much safer life as a refugee in the United States, but sadly, the recent events in Orlando show that I and other LGBT people face huge challenges here. In fact, the New York Times reported on June 16, 2016, "Even before the shooting rampage at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Fla., lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people were already the most likely targets of hate crimes in America, according to an analysis of data collected by the Federal Bureau of Investigation." Put simply, efforts to discredit the poisonous ideology of ISIS and other extremist groups—while extremely important—are insufficient to completely erase the threat of anti-

LGBT violence either here in this country or abroad. Rather, we must also commit to combating homophobia, racism, xenophobia, and bigotry in all of its various forms regardless of the source. And specifically with regards to U.S. domestic policy, we must do something about gun violence in this country.

In order to deal with the issues raised in my testimony, I have several recommendations for the United State Government:

Through the bridges and convening power unique to the United Nations, we can support actions that promote not only the human rights of LGBT persons, but also love, inclusion, tolerance and equality among religions and communities. This requires continued U.S. leadership at forums like the UN Human Rights Council, supporting funding for UN institutions like the UN Refugee Agency, and groundbreaking efforts like the special meeting, among members of the UN Security Council last year, which was the first of its kind to focus exclusively on the abuses faced by LGBT persons in the context of international peace and security. These types of multilateral discussions, along with the Security Council statement issued on Monday condemning the Orlando attack, are critical. The Orlando statement specifically denounced, for the first time, violence targeting people “as a result of their sexual orientation,” and it received support from Russia and Egypt. Going forward, it will make it more difficult for those countries and others to argue against sexual orientation as not being recognized under international human rights agreements.

1. We also need partnerships across communities that can address the serious negative consequences of ISIS Ideology and others like it, including assisting the communities that are most at risk and vulnerable. For example, in San Francisco I have partnered with other activists to launch Spectra Project which assists the LGBT community by providing necessary education and shelter to them, while also promoting a positive image of the LGBT community among refugees and host communities.
2. While U.S. domestic policy is slightly outside of my area of expertise, on a personal level I would like to emphasize the need for our country to prevent military-style weapons from falling into the hands of deeply disturbed individuals who seek to do harm to others. Such policies are necessary to protect not only members of the LGBT community, but all Americans.

Thank you once more for the invitation to speak today. I look forward to answering your questions.