

Hearing before the Senate Committee on
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

“Adapting to Defend the Homeland
against the Evolving International Terrorist Threat”

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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, the Department of Defense (DOD) - Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations / Low-Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) Mark Mitchell, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) – Counterterrorism Division Deputy Assistant Director Nikki Floris, and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) - Acting Deputy Under Secretary for Intelligence and Analysis, Robin Taylor.

Threat Overview

It is the National Counterterrorism Center’s (NCTC) assessment that the current terrorism threat environment is complex, challenging, and geographically expansive, as we saw with recent attacks throughout Europe, in Egypt, and of course in New York City on Halloween. Both the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq ash Sham, or ISIS, and al-Qa’ida have proven to be extremely resilient organizations. ISIS continues to use attacks and propaganda to attract violent extremists and to project its influence worldwide. Other terrorist groups around the world continue to exploit safe havens created by ungoverned spaces and threaten the U.S. and our allies. While the scale of the capabilities currently demonstrated by most violent extremist actors does not rise to the level of core al-Qa’ida on 9/11, it is fair to say that we face more threats originating in more places and involving more individuals than we have at any time in the past 16 years.

HVEs

First, allow me to provide an overview of the most immediate threat to the U.S., which is the threat of violence carried out by Homegrown Violent Extremists (HVEs). While there are multiple factors that mobilize HVEs to violence, ISIS’s large-scale media and propaganda efforts most likely will continue to reach and influence HVEs in the U.S. There have been fewer attacks

in the U.S. this year than the past two years, and we are working to determine the potential factors that may be responsible for this decrease in successful attacks. Arrests of HVEs remain at similar levels.

What we have seen over time is that HVEs—either lone actors or small insular groups—tend to gravitate toward soft targets and simple tactics of opportunity that do not require advanced skills or outside training. We expect that most HVEs will continue to focus on soft targets, while still considering traditional targets, such as military personnel, law enforcement, and other symbols of the U.S. government. Some HVEs— such as the San Bernardino shooters in December 2015—may have conducted attacks against personally significant targets. We are still working to learn more about what may have motivated suspects in other recent attacks.

ISIS

In the past year, we have seen ISIS pursue a spectrum of attack plots. This spectrum ranges from those “inspired” by the group—in which ISIS claims responsibility for attacks where the attackers had no direct ties to the group—to attacks “enabled” by the group—when ISIS reaches out to individuals through secure communications to prompt an attack—to “directed” ones, in which the group provides direct support from Iraq and Syria to attempt attacks.

ISIS’s reach and narrative, rooted in unceasing warfare against all enemies, extends beyond the Syria-Iraq battlefield. Since 2014, ISIS has conducted or inspired attacks ranging in tactics and targets—the bombing of a Russian airliner in Egypt; the attacks in Paris at restaurants, a sports stadium, and a concert venue; the killing of hostages and law enforcement officials at a café in Bangladesh; and the growing number of vehicle attacks such as those carried out in Europe during the past year— all of which demonstrate how ISIS can capitalize on local networks on the ground for attacks.

As we saw with the July arrests in Australia, and with the attacks in Belgium and Istanbul last year, terrorists remain focused on aviation targets because they recognize the economic damage that may result from even unsuccessful attempts to either down aircraft or attack airports, as well as the potential high loss of life, and the attention the media devotes to these attacks. ISIS continues to innovate and test for security vulnerabilities in order to further its external operations and challenge our security apparatus. Since the 9/11 attacks, worldwide security improvements have hardened the aviation sector but have not entirely removed the threat. Violent extremist publications continue to promote the desirability of aviation attacks and have provided information on how to target the air domain.

For these reasons, shrinking the size of territory controlled by ISIS and denying the group access to additional manpower and funds in the form of foreign terrorist fighters and operatives, as well as oil revenue and other financial resources, remains a top priority. Success in these areas will ultimately be an essential part of our efforts to continue reducing the group’s ability to pursue external attacks and to diminish its global reach and impact. We have made clear

progress in these areas: ISIS has lost more than 90 percent of the territory it once controlled in both Iraq and Syria; the number of fighters it has in those countries has significantly decreased, and its illicit income streams are down. But despite this progress, ISIS's ability to carry out terrorist attacks in Syria, Iraq, and abroad has not yet been sufficiently diminished, and the consistent tempo of ISIS-linked terrorist activity is a reminder of the group's continued global reach.

The group's external operations capability has been building and entrenching during the past two years, and we do not think battlefield losses alone will be sufficient to degrade its terrorism capabilities. As we have seen, the group has launched attacks in periods when it held large swaths of territory and when under significant pressure from the defeat-ISIS campaign. In addition to its efforts to conduct external attacks from its safe havens in Iraq and Syria, ISIS's capacity to reach sympathizers around the world through its robust social media capability is unprecedented and gives the group access to large numbers of HVEs.

During the past two years, ISIS has lost several key leaders whose deaths have deprived the group of senior members with unique skillsets. However, the group's effective propaganda continues to inspire violence even after the removal of key spokesmen, as we have seen by the range of radicalized individuals who continue to look to statements by deceased terrorist figures for guidance and justifications to conduct attacks. ISIS's media enterprise will probably continue to redirect its narrative away from losses to emphasize new opportunities, as seen with ISIS's recent media attention to territories outside the areas it formerly held in Syria and Iraq. It may also try to paint losses as a rallying cry for revenge against local security forces and international counterterrorism actors, including the U.S. Despite international efforts to prevent terrorism online, the volume of media availability and its spread across a multitude of platforms and websites will continue to be a challenge, but we are steadfast in our containment measures.

Deceased ISIS spokesman and external operations leader Abu Muhammad al-Adnani's final public statement encouraged ISIS supporters in the U.S. to conduct attacks at home instead of traveling to Iraq and Syria, suggesting that ISIS recognizes the difficulty of sending operatives to the U.S. for an attack. ISIS most likely views the U.S. as a harder target than Europe because it is further away, U.S. ports of entry are under far less stress from mass migration, and U.S. law enforcement agencies are not overtaxed by persistent unrest, as are some of our counterparts overseas.

Al-Qa'ida

We remain concerned about al-Qa'ida's safe haven in Syria because of the presence of veteran al-Qa'ida operatives there, some who have been part of the group since before the September 11 attacks, and who are exploiting the conflict there to threaten the U.S. and our allies.

The Nusrah Front, also known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, is al-Qa'ida's largest affiliate and one of the most capable armed groups operating in Syria. Its integration of al-Qa'ida veterans provides the group with strategic guidance and enhances its standing within the al-Qa'ida global movement. We believe the Nusrah Front's statement in July 2016 announcing the separation of the group from the broader al-Qa'ida movement was in name only and that Nusrah Front remains part of al-Qa'ida, supporting its ideology and intent to target the West. We will continue our efforts to counter this group and the threats it poses to the West.

Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, the only known al-Qa'ida affiliate to have attempted a directed attack against the U.S., continues to exploit the conflict in Yemen to gain new recruits and secure areas of safe haven, contributing to its enduring threat. The group continues to threaten and call for attacks against the U.S. in its prolific media production, including its English-language *Inspire* magazine, providing instruction and ideological encouragement for individual actors.

We have constrained al-Qa'ida's effectiveness and its ability to recruit, train, and deploy operatives from its safe haven in South Asia; however, this does not mean that the threat from core al-Qa'ida in the tribal areas of Pakistan or in eastern Afghanistan has been eliminated. We believe that al-Qa'ida and its adherents in the region still aspire to conduct attacks and will remain a threat as long as the group can potentially regenerate capability to threaten the Homeland with large-scale attacks. Al-Qa'ida's allies in South Asia—particularly the Taliban and the Haqqani Network—also continue to present a high threat to our regional interests.

We are also cognizant of the level of risk the U.S. may face over time if al-Qa'ida regenerates, finds renewed safe haven, or restores lost capability. We are on alert for signs that al-Qa'ida's capability to attack the West from South Asia is being restored and would warn immediately if we find trends in that direction.

Hizballah / Iran

In keeping with the diverse set of threats we face, I would be remiss not to briefly call out the malign activities of Iran and its partner, Lebanese Hizballah. Iran remains the foremost state sponsor of terrorism, providing financial aid, advanced weapons and tactics, and direction to militant and terrorist groups across the Middle East, all while it cultivates its own network of operatives across the globe as part of its international attack infrastructure.

Lebanese Hizballah during recent years has demonstrated its intent to foment regional instability by deploying thousands of fighters to Syria to fight for the Syrian regime; providing weapons, tactics and direction to militant and terrorist groups in Iraq and Yemen; and deploying operatives to Azerbaijan, Egypt, Thailand, Cyprus, and Peru to lay the groundwork for attacks. In the U.S., FBI's arrest in June of two operatives charged with working on behalf of Hizballah was a stark reminder of Hizballah's continued desire to maintain a global attack

infrastructure that poses an enduring threat to our interests.

Trends

Stepping back, two trends in the contemporary threat environment continue to concern us. The first is the ability of terrorist actors to communicate with each other outside our reach with the use of encrypted communications. Most recently, terrorists have begun widespread use of private groups in encrypted applications to supplement traditional social media for sharing propaganda in an effort to circumvent the intelligence collection and private sector disruption of their public accounts. As a result, collecting information on particular terrorist activities is increasingly difficult.

The second is that we're seeing a proliferation of rapidly evolving plot vectors that emerge simply by an individual encouraged or inspired to take action who then quickly gathers the few resources needed and moves into an operational phase. ISIS is aware of this, and those connected to the group have understood that by motivating actors in their own locations to take action against Western countries and targets, these actors can be effective, especially if they cannot travel abroad to ISIS-controlled areas. In terms of propaganda and recruitment, ISIS supporters can generate further support for their movement, even without carrying out catastrophic, mass-casualty attacks. This is an innovation in the terrorist playbook that poses a great challenge. Further, martyrdom videos and official ISIS claims of responsibility for inspired individuals' attacks probably allow the group to convey a greater impression of control over attacks in the West and maximize international media exposure.

Counterterrorism and Terrorism Prevention

During the past 16 years, we have made tremendous progress in improving our ability to detect and prevent catastrophic attacks like September 11, 2001. We, along with many of our partners, have built a national security apparatus that has substantially expanded our ability to protect the safety and security of our communities. We share more information—with more frequency and with more partners—than we ever would have imagined possible a decade ago. And, we have reduced external threats emanating from core al-Qa'ida and ISIS because of aggressive counterterrorism actions against these groups. However, given these groups' resiliency and ability to innovate, the whole-of-government must respond with even more innovative approaches to prevent the radicalization to violence and recruitment to terrorism of individuals, specifically here in the Homeland.

As a federal government, we have taken steps to organize and resource our efforts to prevent terrorism more effectively, under the leadership of DHS and the Department of Justice. We have been successful at helping provide communities with the information and tools they need

to identify potential extremists and to engage with them before they reach the point of becoming an actual terrorist.

NCTC accomplishes this mainly through a series of Community Awareness Briefings (CAB) and exercises that are produced and presented in cooperation with our interagency partners. As an example, the CAB is an unclassified presentation on radicalization to violence and violent extremist recruitment designed to build awareness and catalyze community efforts to prevent individuals from mobilizing to criminal activity or violence. We also developed the CAB “Train-the-Presenter” Program, which is designed to train local officials to present the CAB themselves to local audiences. Recently, these were expanded to include all forms of violent extremism in the U.S. to respond to a growing demand from federal, state, local and community partners for tools that reflect the full domestic threat picture.

I am proud of all of the good work our government – including my colleagues at NCTC – is doing to prevent terrorism here in the homeland, but the reality, as was so tragically demonstrated in New York, is that we have to do more. The scale at which we undertake these efforts is too limited, and it is certainly not sized to tackle the kind of problem we are experiencing here in the Homeland today. But we do know this: prevention work has a positive impact in the places where we have tried it, we are poised to receive significant metrics through the good work of DHS that will help us better evaluate these efforts, and violent extremism is not a monolith.

The bottom line is that our government’s work to prevent all forms of violent extremism expands the counterterrorism toolkit beyond the hard power tools of disruption, it is resource efficient, and enables local partners—including law enforcement, social services providers, schools and communities—to create alternative pathways that can protect our youth from a variety of violent foreign and domestic ideologies. But, we need to reaffirm and expand our commitment to prevention, both resourcing it at the federal, state, and local level, and maintaining a whole-of-government effort to continue to keep Americans safe.

Conclusion

Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member McCaskill, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you this morning. The role that NCTC, DOD-SO/LIC, FBI and DHS play in combatting terrorism – at home and abroad, along with the committee’s support – is critically important. The men and women of our nation’s counterterrorism community work tirelessly to defeat the efforts of terrorist groups around the globe. There is no doubt that the world today is more challenging and more dangerous. But I would also argue that we have more capacity to defend ourselves – more capacity to keep ourselves safe – than we have ever had before.

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