

**Hearing before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence**  
**“Current Terrorist Threat to the United States”**  
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Thank you Chairman Burr, Vice Chairman Feinstein, and members of the Committee. I appreciate this opportunity to be here today to discuss the worldwide terrorist threat and our efforts to counter it.

My statement reflects the collective work and insights of the National Counterterrorism Center’s dedicated men and women. Although I am new to my position as their Director, I feel privileged and honored to lead them. I want to express my appreciation to the Committee for its unflagging support of these hardworking officers.

Hearings like this are an opportunity to continue this constructive dialogue with the public and its elected representatives on the terrorist threat we face as a nation today.

**Strategic Assessment: The Global Terrorist Landscape in 2015**

Today’s terrorist threat environment is dynamic and dangerous, as are the wide array of terrorist actors driving it. They are located across a wide swath of Africa, Asia and the Middle East with the ability to reach into the West, and even the United States.

Events during the past several years—and especially the past nine months—have demonstrated a new level of specialization and fragmentation within the larger terrorism landscape. New groups have emerged in the wake of the Arab uprisings in 2011. Most are located in the Middle East and North Africa and are primarily focused on achieving local gains. We have witnessed the rise of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) with its ambitious vision, quick territorial expansion, extreme violence and brutality, and innovative use of social media. All this is happening, even as we assess the leadership cadre of core al-Qa’ida – the group that planned and executed the 9/11 attacks – is at its weakest point since before 2001.

We might be moving into a new era in which centralized leadership of a terrorist organization matters less, group identity is more fluid, and violent extremist narratives focus on a wider range of alleged grievances and enemies.

The quantitative and qualitative scale of threat we are facing in the U.S. and the West is different from the threat in the countries and regions where many of these terrorist groups are located. In the U.S. and West, we have reduced the threat of catastrophic attack similar to what we experienced on September 11, 2001 due to consistent counterterrorism (CT) pressure that we, and our partners, have been able to bring to bear against some of the most dangerous and violent

terrorist groups. Continuing key elements of that pressure will be essential to preventing the return of the higher-scale threats.

Recent actions by al-Qa'ida adherents overseas underscore our continued concern regarding the potential of high-impact attacks, including the ability of terrorist groups and individual violent extremists to target Western aviation. As you know, last summer the United States and United Kingdom implemented enhanced security measures at airports with direct flights to the United States, which included new rules aimed at screening personal electronic devices. Undeterred by regular improvements and enhancements to security measures, terrorist groups continue to see commercial aviation as a desirable symbolic target, and these aspirations are not limited to al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula.

Despite the persistent concerns over aviation security, we also still face a range of moderate and small scale threats from a small, but persistent number of transnationally-oriented groups, including al-Qa'ida and some of its affiliates and allies. These groups remain intent on striking the United States and are content to patiently develop their access and operational plans over multiple years. I will go into greater detail on the threats we see from specific terrorist actors later in my statement.

We face a much greater recurring threat from lone offenders and possibly loose networks of individuals. Of the eleven attacks in the West since last May, ten were conducted by individual violent extremists. Two occurred in the U.S.—one in September, and another in October. The majority of these lone offender attacks more closely resemble the size, scale, and sophistication of random acts of violence than they do the destructiveness of the organized and well-developed plots that we witnessed in the years after September 11, 2001. These attacks have happened more frequently, yet thankfully resulted in relatively few casualties. We expect that individuals and small networks will try to maintain and build upon this momentum and capitalize on the media coverage that these attacks generate.

In contrast, our allies and partners in Africa, Asia and the Middle East face a much different threat outlook than we are facing in the West.

We assess countries in these areas—as well as many other nations worldwide—face a higher level of threat, which is manifesting in a different form than the West has experienced recently. In all of these regions, terrorists are trying to displace local governance or make territorial gains. They are conducting violent attacks on a much more frequent basis and at a larger scale than in the West. In the past year alone, we assess that there have been hundreds, of attacks in these regions, resulting in thousands of deaths. Terrorists active in these regions are contributing to population displacements that affect millions. Some are also responsible for stoking sectarian tensions and contributing to the proliferation of Sunni-Shia violence, particularly within Muslim-majority countries.

Many of the most ambitious terrorist groups are located in countries continuing to work through the effects of the Arab uprisings, including Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen. Others are active in countries undergoing insurgencies, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria, Somalia, and most of the countries previously mentioned.

Despite distinct threat environments, the broader international community shares concern about the greater than 20,000 foreign fighters from more than 90 countries who have traveled to Syria since the conflict began. The rate of travelers into Syria exceeds the rate of travelers who went into Afghanistan/Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen, or Somalia at any point in the last ten years.

While the majority of foreign fighters have emanated from the Middle East and North Africa, more than 3,400 westerners have traveled to join the fight against the Assad regime. Within that pool of westerners, more than 150 U.S. persons from a variety of backgrounds and locations in the United States have traveled or attempted to travel to Syria. A handful of these U.S. persons have died in Syria.

The foreign fighter threat is multi-faceted and will likely affect the U.S. and West for years in ways that are distinct from Africa, Asia and the Middle East. We all share the concern that fighters will attempt to return to their home countries or regions, and look to participate in or support terrorism and the radicalization to violence. We have witnessed this phenomenon in the lone offender attack against the Jewish Museum of Belgium, which killed four. We have also seen it manifested in an ISIL-claimed attack against the Corinthia Hotel in Libya, which killed nine, including an American. However, our partners abroad will face the added burden of those who opt to remain in Iraq and Syria and become citizens of ISIL's self-declared caliphate, or seek out other battlefields or violent extremist experiences using the personal connections and networks they gained during their time in conflict.

I will continue my remarks by delving into further detail on the terrorist threats to the homeland and then outline the threat to U.S. interests overseas. I will then focus the remainder of my remarks on outlining some of NCTC's efforts to address this complicated threat picture.

### **Threat to the Homeland**

The up-tick in moderate-to-small scale attacks in the West since last summer by individual extremists reinforces our assessment that the most likely and immediate threat to the Homeland will come from Homegrown Violent Extremists (HVEs) or individuals with loose affiliation to terrorist groups overseas. ISIL's rise during the past year and its adept exploitation of the media attention generated by the group's actions has created unprecedented opportunities for the group to reach potential recruits or influence those inspired by the group's message. Lone actors or insular groups who act autonomously pose the most serious HVE threat, and we assess HVEs will likely continue gravitating to simpler plots that do not require advanced skills, outside training, or communication with others.

We are closely monitoring for signs of homegrown violent extremists in the United States plotting attacks here. The success of small arms attacks in France, Canada and the hatchet attack against police officers in New York City underscores the threat from emboldened HVEs and, how the rapid succession of these attacks may motivate some to attempt to replicate these tactics with little-to-no warning. We are concerned by the growing trend by extremists in the West toward carrying out simple opportunity-driven attacks, as those further diminish our insight into terrorist operational planning and readiness.

These attacks coupled with those in France, Australia, and similar to the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings highlight the danger posed by lone actors and insular groups not directly tied or loosely tied to terrorist organizations, as well as the difficulty of identifying these types of plots before they take place because they often exhibit few behaviors that law enforcement and intelligence officers traditionally used to detect a readiness to commit violence. The perceived success of previous lone offender attacks combined with al-Qa'ida's, AQAP's, and ISIL's incendiary propaganda promoting individual acts of terrorism has raised the profile of this tactic.

HVEs make use of a diverse online environment that is dynamic, evolving, and self-sustaining. This online environment is likely to play a critical role in the foreseeable future in radicalizing and mobilizing HVEs towards violence. Despite the removal of important terrorist leaders during the last several years, the online environment continues to reinforce a violent extremist identity, supplies grievances, and provides HVEs the means to connect with terrorist groups overseas.

This boundless virtual environment, combined with terrorists' sophisticated use of social media, makes it increasingly difficult to protect our youth from sometimes horrifically brutal propaganda. ISIL's online media presence has become sophisticated at disseminating timely, high-quality media content across multiple platforms. The group's English-language propaganda is drawing westerners to Syria. These violent extremists are making contact with terrorist groups and gaining battlefield experience, which could pose a threat to the Homeland if they are able to return undetected.

### **The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)**

ISIL is a terrorist organization that has exploited the conflict in Syria and sectarian tensions in Iraq to entrench itself in both countries. The group's strength and expansionist agenda poses an ongoing threat to our regional allies and to U.S. facilities and personnel in both the Middle East and the West. In November, ISIL publicly announced its expansion into Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, and last month the group publicly confirmed the announcement of an affiliate in South Asia. The allegiance of violent extremists in these countries provides ISIL greater operational reach and helps legitimize its self-appointed position as the leader of all Muslims. The growth of ISIL's support in Libya most likely provides the group with an additional safe haven where it can collaborate with other North African terrorists aligned with ISIL and to possibly plot attacks.

Then-Iraq-based ISIL exploited the conflict and chaos in Syria to expand its operations across the border. The group, with al-Qa'ida's approval, established the al-Nusra Front as a cover for its Syria-based activities, but in April 2013, publicly declared its presence in Syria under the ISIL name. ISIL accelerated its efforts to overthrow the Iraqi government, seizing control of Fallujah last January. The group marched from its safe haven in Syria and across the border into northern Iraq, killing thousands of Iraqi Muslims on its way to seizing Mosul this June.

Along the way, ISIL has aggressively recruited new adherents. Some joined ISIL to escape Assad's brutal treatment and oppression of his own people. Others joined out of

frustration, feeling marginalized by their own governments. But many joined out of intimidation and fear, forced to choose either obedience to ISIL or a violent, oftentimes public death.

Our latest assessment on ISIL's strength places the group's manpower between 20,000 and 31,500 members. Sunni groups that ISIL is fighting with in Iraq also augment the group's strength in that battlefield. ISIL's control over the Iraq-Syria border enables the group to easily move members between Iraq and Syria, which can rapidly change the number of fighters in either country. ISIL is also drawing some recruits from the more than 20,000 foreign fighters who have traveled to Syria.

ISIL's momentum on the battlefield in Iraq and Syria has slowed in recent months in the face of coalition airstrikes and ground offensives by Iraqi Security Forces, Peshmerga, and Shia militia forces. Coalition airstrikes have also killed several important ISIL military commanders. Nonetheless, ISIL maintains a deep bench of leaders and continues to launch local offensives to capture terrain while shoring up defenses in its strongholds. The large swaths of eastern Syria and western Iraq that ISIL controls provides the group established sanctuaries from which they plan, train, and plot terrorist acts with little interference. Its battlefield successes also have given ISIL an extensive war chest derived from black-market oil sales, smuggling, robberies, extortion, and ransom payments for hostages.

ISIL has used its territorial gains, access to foreign fighters, and sophisticated media operations to challenge al-Qa'ida for primacy within the global terrorist movement. While the leadership of al-Qa'ida's recognized affiliates have reaffirmed their allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri and criticized ISIL's declaration of a caliphate, ISIL's ascendance has caused rifts within some al-Qa'ida-aligned groups, which we continue to monitor.

ISIL's safe haven in Syria and Iraq and the group's access to resources pose a direct threat to U.S. personnel and facilities in the region. This includes our embassy in Baghdad and our consulate in Erbil, as well as the U.S. military advisors deployed in Iraq. ISIL also continues to hold foreign hostages, after its brutal execution of Americans James Foley, Steven Sotloff, and Peter Kassig.

ISIL's threat extends beyond the region, to the West. There have been at least 18 ISIL-linked attacks against western interests in the past year, resulting in 24 deaths and 11 injuries. In January, ISIL's affiliates in Libya probably carried out a vehicle-borne improved explosive device (VBIED) and small-arms attack on the Corinthia Hotel in Tripoli. Last September, ISIL's spokesman and external operations chief called on ISIL sympathizers worldwide to attack Westerners and their property, a call to action that the group has repeated in its English-language propaganda. The attacks in Ottawa and Quebec this past October, for which ISIL publicly claimed responsibility, and most recently the attacks against a police officer and kosher grocery in Paris by a French violent extremist who claimed the attacks for ISIL, clearly demonstrate the threat posed by ISIL-inspired extremists and returning foreign fighters.

We remain mindful of the possibility that an ISIL-sympathizer could conduct a limited, self-directed attack here at home with no warning. We also remain concerned that ISIL may place a greater priority on more organized attacks on the West, as opposed to propaganda driven

lone offender attacks. The group's ambitions have grown in parallel with its capabilities; it sees itself in competition with core al-Qa'ida and could develop its own anti-Western plotting capability and draw from some of the thousands of foreign fighters in theater.

### **Al-Qa'ida Core and Pakistan/Afghanistan-based Groups**

Turning now to core al-Qa'ida and Afghanistan/Pakistan-based groups, we anticipate that, despite core al-Qa'ida's diminished leadership cadre, remaining members will continue to pose a threat to western interests in South Asia and would attempt to strike the Homeland should an opportunity arise. Pakistan and Afghanistan-based al-Qa'ida adherents still aspire to conduct attacks against the West, even if the group's diminished leadership could not replicate the impact and casualties of a 9/11-style attack.

Despite ISIL's challenge, al-Zawahiri remains the recognized leader of the global terrorist movement among al-Qa'ida affiliates and allies, and the groups continue to defer to his guidance on critical issues. Since the start of the Arab unrest in North Africa and the Middle East, Zawahiri and other members of the group's leadership have directed their focus there, encouraging cadre and associates to support and take advantage of the unrest.

We have long forecast a degradation of the security environment in Afghanistan and, with the end of our combat mission there, we are entering a period where we begin to measure the impact of this decline. Al-Qa'ida's primary presence in Afghanistan currently consists of small numbers in the country's remote northeast, and our chief concern is that a power vacuum could emerge which in turn might offer the group space to reconstitute there and pose a continued threat to the Homeland.

***South Asia-Based Militants.*** Pakistani and Afghan militant groups—including Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its splinter elements, Lashkar-e Tayyiba (LT), and the Haqqani Network—continue to pose a direct threat to U.S. interests and our allies in the region, where these groups probably will remain focused. We continue to watch for indicators that any of these groups, networks, or individuals are actively pursuing or have decided to incorporate operations outside of South Asia as a strategy to achieve their objectives.

TTP remains a significant threat in Pakistan despite the ongoing Pakistan military operations in North Waziristan and Khyber, and leadership changes last year that probably contributed to the most internal fracturing since the group's formation. In August, TTP commander Abdul Wali left the group to form Jama'at ul-Ahrar (JuA), and, in October, the TTP spokesman and five regional amirs announced their decision to leave the group and pledge allegiance to ISIL. JuA subsequently claimed responsibility for the November attack at the Wagah Border Crossing that killed at least 50 people, and TTP conducted the 16 December attack on a school for military officers' children in Peshawar that killed approximately 150 people, mostly children. TTP warned the attack was just a "trailer," suggesting additional attacks might be planned and underscoring the threat the group still poses within Pakistan, especially against soft targets.

LT remains focused on its regional goals in South Asia. The group opposes improving relations between India and Pakistan, and its leaders consistently speak out against India and the United States, accusing both countries of trying to destabilize Pakistan. LT has attacked western interests in South Asia in pursuit of its regional objectives, as demonstrated by the targeting of hotels frequented by westerners during the Mumbai attacks in 2008. LT leaders almost certainly recognize that an attack on the U.S. would result in intense international backlash against Pakistan and endanger the group's safe haven there. However, LT also provides training to Pakistani and Western militants, some of whom could plot terrorist attacks in the West without direction from LT leadership. In December, LT's operations chief Zaki-ur Rehman Lakhvi, incarcerated in Pakistan since the 2008 Mumbai attacks, was granted bail, a move immediately opposed by the government of Pakistan. LT remains a threat to U.S. interests in South Asia regardless of Lakhvi's status.

In Afghanistan, we have turned the corner from a combat mission to one where we train, advise, and assist our Afghan partners to combat threats to their stability. Chief among these threats is the Taliban and the Haqqani Network, which, despite suffering some setbacks from Pakistani military incursions into Waziristan, remain capable of carrying out high-profile attacks against remaining U.S., NATO, Afghan government, and other allied nation targets. As evidence of this threat, and in contrast to the usual relative lull in violence during the winter months, the Taliban, Haqqanis, and their militant allies carried out multiple of attacks in Kabul and other major population centers at the end of 2014.

### **Al-Qa'ida Affiliates and Allies**

**AQAP.** Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) remains committed to conducting attacks in the West and desires to target western interests in Yemen while operating in areas of Yemen with minimal government presence. January's attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine office in Paris was AQAP's first successful lethal operation in the West. Although the degree of command and control of the operation is still under investigation, both the attackers and AQAP attributed the attack to the group. AQAP's three attempted attacks against the United States to date—the airliner plot of December 2009, an attempted attack against U.S.-bound cargo planes in October 2010, and an airliner plot in May 2012—demonstrate the group's continued pursuit of high-profile attacks against the United States. In a propaganda video released in December, a senior leader threatened American citizens all over the world, highlighting AQAP's persistent interest in targeting the U.S.

AQAP also presents a high threat to U.S. personnel and facilities in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, especially during a time of political instability and growing sectarian violence. As you know, the United States has suspended embassy operations in Yemen and temporarily relocated staff out of Sana'a. We continue to track closely the status of AQAP plotting against our facilities and personnel in Yemen that would suggest a repeat of a 2013 credible threat which prompted the Department of State to close U.S. embassies in the Middle East and North Africa. We are concerned AQAP could take advantage of the political chaos in the capital to carry out attacks against our personnel or other Western targets in Sanaa. The group may also plan additional attacks against Huthis to further destabilize the situation in Sanaa. AQAP has also intensified its attacks against the Huthis, as evidenced by their October large-scale VBIED attack

in Sanaa which resulted in more than 50 deaths, all while continuing to target the Yemeni government. In addition, last July AQAP launched its first successful attack in Saudi Arabia since 2009, underscoring the group's continued focus on operations in the Kingdom. Separately, the failed rescue attempt of American journalist Luke Somers is likely to embolden the group with continued attempts to kidnap westerners in Yemen, in particular Americans.

Finally, AQAP continues its efforts to radicalize and mobilize to violence individuals outside Yemen through the publication of its English-language magazine *Inspire*. In December, the group released the 13<sup>th</sup> edition with instructions for crafting a concealable non-metallic explosive device, similar to the explosive AQAP used when it attempted to blow up an airliner bound for Detroit in December 2009, and called for individuals to attack Western airliners. Previous editions have encouraged "lone offender" attacks in the West, naming specific targets in the United States, United Kingdom, and France and provided instructions on how to construct a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device.

***Al-Shabaab.*** We continue to monitor al-Shabaab and its foreign fighter cadre as it continues to threaten U.S. interests in East Africa. We assess it is a potential threat to the Homeland, as some al-Shabaab leaders in the past publicly called for transnational attacks, but its interest appears to still be primarily focused on operations in East Africa. The group has attracted dozens of U.S. persons—mostly ethnic Somalis—who have traveled to Somalia since 2006.

Al-Shabaab is mainly focused on undermining the Somali Federal Government and combating African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and regional military forces operating in Somalia, as demonstrated by its Christmas Day attack on security forces at the Mogadishu International Airport. Al-Shabaab's mid-September 2013 attack on the Westgate mall in Kenya demonstrated that the group continues to plot against regional and Western targets across East Africa as part of its campaign to remove foreign forces aiding the Somali Government.

***AQIM and regional allies.*** Al-Qa'ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its allies remain focused on local and regional attack plotting, including targeting Western interests. The groups have shown minimal interest in targeting the U.S. Homeland.

In Mali, the French-led military intervention has pushed AQIM and its allies from the cities that they once controlled, but the groups maintain safe haven in the less populated areas of northern Mali from which they are able to plan and launch attacks against French and allied forces in the region. Elsewhere, AQIM is taking advantage of permissive operating environments across much of North Africa to broaden its reach. We are concerned that AQIM may be collaborating with local violent extremists, including Ansar al-Sharia groups in Libya and Tunisia.

In 2013, two highly capable AQIM offshoots, Mokhtar Belmokhtar's al-Mulathamun battalion and Tawhid Wal Jihad in West Africa, merged to form the new violent extremist group—al-Murabitun—which will almost certainly seek to conduct additional high profile attacks against Western interests across the region. Belmokhtar—the group's external operations commander—played a leading role in attacks against Western interests in Northwest Africa in



2013, with the January 2013 attack on an oil facility in In-Amenas, Algeria and double suicide bombings in Niger in May of that year. Last year, Belmokhtar reportedly spent time in Libya to escape counterterrorism pressure in Mali, and probably to collaborate with Ansar al-Sharia (AAS) groups and other violent extremist elements in the country to advance his operational goals.

***Al Nusrah Front.*** Although it has struggled to counter ISIL's gains in Syria, al-Nusrah Front is one of the most capable groups within the Syrian opposition and has mounted suicide, explosive, and firearms attacks against regime and security targets across the country; it has also sought to provide limited public services and governance to the local population in areas under its control. Several Westerners have joined al-Nusrah Front, a few of whom have perished in suicide operations, including at least one American, raising concerns capable individuals with extremist contacts and battlefield experience could return to their home countries to commit violence. In April 2013, Al-Nusrah Front's leader, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, pledged allegiance to al-Qa'ida leader al-Zawahiri, publicly affirming the group's ties to core al-Qa'ida. Al-Zawahiri named the group al-Qaida's recognized affiliate in the region later in 2013, ordering ISIL to return to Iraq. Following airstrikes in late-September, al-Jawlani also publicly called for retaliatory measures against those responsible.

***Khorasan Group.*** The Khorasan Group refers to a network of al-Nusrah Front and al-Qa'ida core extremists who share a history of training operatives, facilitating fighters and money, and planning attacks against U.S. and Western targets. The group—composed of fighters with experience in conflicts in Chechnya, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Iran, Yemen, and North Africa—is taking advantage of the Syrian conflict to advance attacks against Western interests. The group is actively recruiting Westerners to serve as external operatives to blend into their home countries.

As of September, intelligence indicated that operatives from the group were nearing the execution phase for an attack in Europe or the Homeland, which prompted U.S. military airstrikes to protect our interests. The IC is continuing to monitor the group for reactions to these strikes to inform our assessments of their effectiveness.

***Al-Qa'ida in the Indian Subcontinent.*** In September, al-Qa'ida announced the establishment of its newest affiliate, al-Qa'ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). We assess the creation of AQIS is not a reaction to al-Qa'ida's split with ISIL, though the timing of the announcement may be used to bolster al-Qa'ida's standing in the global terrorist movement. AQIS, which is led by Sheikh Asim Umer, has stated objectives that include violence against the U.S., establishing Islamic law in South Asia, ending occupation of Muslim lands, and defending Afghanistan under Mullah Omar's leadership. AQIS claimed responsibility for the thwarted hijacking in Karachi of a Pakistani Navy ship in September, asserting that the plot's objective was to hijack two Pakistani ships to attack U.S. and Indian naval vessels and reiterated that the U.S. was its primary target.

***Boko Haram.*** Boko Haram waged unprecedented violence in northeast Nigeria last year and is expanding its reach into other parts of Nigeria and neighboring states to implement its violent interpretation of *sharia* law and suppress the Nigerian Government and regional CT

pressure. Since late 2012, Boko Haram and its splinter faction Ansaru have claimed responsibility for five kidnappings of Westerners, raising their international profile and highlighting the threat they pose to Western and regional interests. Boko Haram has kidnapped scores of additional Nigerians in northeast Nigeria since the kidnapping of 276 school girls from Chibok, Nigeria in April 2014. The group this year has captured all of the Nigerian military outposts in northeast Borno State, giving it control of a 380 mile continuous stretch of international borders, which Chad is currently trying to retake from it, and for the past two weeks has conducted multiple attacks on the Borno State Capital of Maiduguri, the group's birthplace which it intends to make the capital of its Islamic state. The group's violent attacks have led to over one million internally displaced persons and hundreds of thousands of refugees in neighboring Niger, Chad, and Cameroon.

### **Threat from Iran and Shia Groups**

In 2014, Iran, largely through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) Commander Qassem Soleimani, and Hizballah managed an increasingly expansive and effective military campaign against ISIL in Iraq, primarily through its support and use of sectarian political and military proxies to support the Iran-aligned, Shia-dominated government in Baghdad. At the same time, Iran and Hizballah remain committed to defending the Assad regime, including sending billions of dollars in military and economic aid, training pro-regime and Shia militants, and deploying their own personnel into the country. Iran and Hizballah view the Assad regime as a key partner in an "axis of resistance" against Israel and the West and are prepared to take major risks to preserve the regime as well as their critical transshipment routes.

Beyond their role in Syria and Iraq, Iran and Lebanese Hizballah remain committed to conducting terrorist activities worldwide and we are concerned their activities could either endanger or target U.S. and other Western interests. Iran remains the foremost state sponsor of terrorism, and works through the IRGC-QF and Ministry of Intelligence and Security to support groups that target U.S. and Israeli interests globally. Hizballah has engaged in an aggressive terrorist campaign in recent years and continues attack planning abroad. In April 2014, two Hizballah operatives were arrested in Thailand and one admitted that they were there to carry out a bomb attack against Israeli tourists, underscoring the threat to civilian centers.

### **NCTC's Counterterrorism Efforts**

As I discussed earlier, the United States, United Kingdom, France, and the broader international community have increasingly expressed concerns about the greater than 20,000 foreign fighters who could potentially return to their home countries to participate in or support terrorist attacks.

NCTC is undertaking a broad Center-wide effort to track foreign fighters traveling to Syria, working closely with our Intelligence Community partners. We work to resolve the identities of potential fighters to uncover possible derogatory information in NCTC holdings. Additionally, the U.S. Government continues to work closely with foreign partners to combat threats emanating from Syria.

As part of this effort, NCTC aggregates information on known or suspected terrorists traveling to Syria in the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment (TIDE). This effort has created a valuable forum for identifying, tracking, and sharing information with law enforcement, counterterrorism, screening, and watchlisting communities on known or suspected terrorists.

Our metrics-based tracking and assessment of these terrorist identities has directly helped to resolve inconclusive identities, enhance TIDE records, and upgrade watchlist statuses on several hundred known or suspected terrorists.

TIDE is much more than a screening database – it is an analytic database. It feeds the unclassified screening database so that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of State and other agencies have timely and accurate information about known and suspected terrorists. As disparate pieces of information about known or suspected terrorists (KSTs) are received, trained analysts create new records, most often as the result of a nomination by a partner agency. The records are updated—or “enhanced”—regularly as new, related information is included and dated or as unnecessary information is removed. In all cases, there are several layers of review before a nomination is accepted into the system. In the case of U.S. persons, there are at least four layers of review, including a legal review, to ensure the derogatory information is sufficient and meets appropriate standards.

To better manage and update the identities of individuals who have travelled overseas to engage in violence in Syria and Iraq, we have created a special threat case in TIDE. This is a special feature in the TIDE system which allows us to focus efforts on smaller groups of individuals. A threat case links all known actors, and their personal information, involved in a particular threat stream or case and makes that information available to the intelligence, screening, and law enforcement communities.

NCTC’s management of this unique consolidation of terrorist identities has created a valuable forum for identifying and sharing information about Syrian foreign fighters—including ISIL—with community partners. It has better integrated the community’s efforts to identify, enhance, and expedite the nomination of Syrian foreign fighter records to the Terrorist Screening Database for placement in U.S. Government screening systems.

NCTC’s Pursuit Group, whose mission is to identify non-obvious terrorism connections and develop leads for other agencies to investigate, is working to fully identify foreign fighters entering Syria who have potential access or connections to the Homeland, so they can be watchlisted. This analysis leverages NCTC’s unique access to a wider range of IC and law enforcement information than any other agency, both within NCTC's counterterrorism data holdings as well as natively through embedded officers from ten other agencies.

## **Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)**

The growing number of individuals going abroad as foreign terrorist fighters to Iraq and Syria only emphasizes the importance of prevention. Any hope of enduring security against

terrorism or defeating organizations like ISIL rests in our ability to diminish the appeal of terrorism and dissuade individuals from joining them in the first place.

To this end, we continue to refine and expand the preventive side of counterterrorism. We have seen a steady proliferation of more proactive and engaged community awareness efforts across the United States, with the goal of giving communities the information and the tools they need to see radicalization in their midst and do something about it before it manifests itself in violence. NCTC, in direct collaboration with DHS, has led the creation of CVE tools to build community resilience across the country.

Working and closely coordinating with the Department of Justice (DOJ), DHS, and with the FBI, NCTC is engaged in this work all across the country, and I will point to just one example.

You will recall the case last year in which three teenage girls allegedly attempted to travel from Denver to Syria by way of Frankfurt, Germany, where their travel was disrupted. In the aftermath of that incident, we, in concert with DOJ, DHS, and FBI, sent our officers on multiple occasions to meet with the greater Denver community and to raise awareness among community and law enforcement audiences about the terrorist recruitment threat. The briefing, developed in partnership with DHS, is now tailored to address the specific issue of foreign fighter recruitment in Syria and Iraq; and we have received a strong demand signal for more such outreach.

This is not a law enforcement-oriented effort that might be perceived as intimidating. Rather, it is an effort to share information about how members of our communities are being targeted and recruited to join terrorists overseas. Seen in that light, we have had a remarkably positive reaction from the communities with whom we have engaged.

We continue to expand our CVE tools. With our DHS colleagues, we have created and regularly deliver the Community Resilience Exercise, a table top exercise that brings together local law enforcement with community leadership to run through a hypothetical case study based scenario featuring a possible violent extremist or foreign fighter.

## **Conclusion**

Confronting these threats and working with resolve to prevent another terrorist attack remains counterterrorism community's overriding mission. This year NCTC enters its second decade in service to the nation, and while the Center has matured tremendously over that period, we are focused on positioning ourselves to be better prepared to address the terrorist threat in decade to come.

Chairman Burr, Vice Chairman Feinstein, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you this morning. I want to assure you that our attention is concentrated on the security crises in Iraq and Syria—and rightly so. But we continue to detect, disrupt, and defeat threats from across the threat spectrum.

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