



Hearing before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

“Cyber Security, Terrorism, and Beyond: Addressing Evolving Threats to the Homeland”

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Opening

Thank you Chairman Carper, Ranking Member Coburn, and members of the Committee for the opportunity to testify here today so that we might discuss the terrorist threat to the United States, as well as our efforts to counter it.

NCTC Director Olsen and I don't often testify in open hearings, and so we see today as an important opportunity to share our understanding of an evolving, dynamic terrorist threat with the Committee and with the American public.

Indeed, earlier this summer the 9/11 Commissioners challenged national security leaders to communicate more regularly with the American public, and we hope to do just that.

Framing the Threat

As I begin this morning, I'd like to frame this evolving threat in broad terms that are generally applicable across the threat landscape.

The threat from terrorist groups is geographically diffuse, from a diverse array of actors, and it is proving to be both resilient and adaptive to our counterterrorism pressures.

The global jihadist movement continues to increasingly decentralize, both in terms of geography and command and control.

Geographically, it is no longer generally confined to the Afghanistan/Pakistan region; it now covers a broad swath of territory from the Indian Subcontinent, across the Middle East and the Levant, and throughout northern Africa.

Of greatest concern are those terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant—or ISIL—that have taken a foothold in areas where governments have been unable to govern and where lax security has allowed these groups to coalesce, train, and plot.

In terms of command and control, here too we see decentralization, with the amir of an al-Qa'ida affiliate, Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, now serving as deputy to al-Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Additionally, al Qa'ida core is encouraging groups and individuals to act independently in support of the global movement.





There is no longer an expectation that regional affiliates will discuss their operational plans with al-Qa'ida's senior leadership prior to execution.

This diffusion has led to an increase in threats by networks of like-minded violent extremists with allegiances to multiple groups.

This evolution is the result of an adaptive enemy.

Our counterterrorism operations continue to degrade al-Qa'ida core's ability to lead the global terrorist movement and to plan sophisticated attacks.

As a result of leaks and disclosures, including those attributable to Edward Snowden, terrorists now understand the scope and scale of western collection capabilities and they are changing the way they communicate, adopting encryption technologies, shifting accounts, or avoiding electronic communication altogether—all of which frustrate our counterterrorism efforts.

In short, we cannot connect the dots if we cannot collect the dots that matter most. Mr. Chairman, I'd like to focus on three specific areas for the remainder of my time—the threat from ISIL, the threat from AQAP, and the threat from Homegrown Violent Extremists.

Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

The greatest threat to the United States and its interests from ISIL is inside Iraq, which combined with Syria, constitutes the group's power center. As we move further from that base of strength, ISIL's ability to develop and execute a significant, sophisticated attack diminishes. This is not to say it doesn't pose a threat outside the region.

Indeed, the arrest in France of an individual and the subsequent discovery of explosive devices in his possession, as well as the killing of four individuals at a Jewish museum in Belgium provides clear evidence of ISIL's ambition to operate outside the Middle East.

Both of the responsible individuals—who are in custody—reportedly fought alongside ISIL elements. However, these examples also demonstrate that ISIL's ability to carry out complex, significant attacks in the West is currently limited. Left unchecked, that capability is likely to grow and present a more direct threat to the Homeland.

With over 2,000 westerners now believed to be fighting in Syria and Iraq, we assess that the threat to Europe is more immediate. Nevertheless, the United States is not immune.

Over 100 U.S. persons from a variety of backgrounds and from across the country have traveled or attempted to travel to the region, including some who have looked to engage with ISIL. Most of these individuals are believed to have western travel documentation that would ease their re-entry, which is why identifying them is a top priority for the United States and its allies.

This is why it is so important that the international community challenge ISIL's regional ambitions now and work together over time to defeat ISIL. Left unchecked, ISIL poses an increasing threat to all governments it considers apostate—not just to the United States or European nations, but also Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African nations.

Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

Let me now turn to al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula. We continue to assess that AQAP remains the al-Qa'ida affiliate most likely to attempt transnational attacks against the United States.

The group's repeated efforts to conceal explosive devices to destroy aircraft demonstrate its continued pursuit of high-profile attacks against the West, its awareness of Western security procedures, and its efforts to adapt.





AQAP also presents a high threat to U.S. personnel and facilities in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. In August of 2013, the State Department issued a global travel alert and closed U.S. embassies in the Middle East and North Africa as a precautionary step against such threats. We assess that we at least temporarily delayed this plot, but we continue to track closely any information on AQAP plotting against our personnel and facilities.

The group continues its efforts to radicalize and mobilize individuals outside Yemen through its *Inspire* magazine. The most recent issue—its twelfth—was released in March and continued to encourage “lone offender” attacks in the West, naming specific targets in the United States, United Kingdom, and France.

Homegrown Violent Extremists (HVEs)

Finally, let me say a few words about Homegrown Violent Extremists. The boundless online virtual environment, combined with terrorists’ increasingly sophisticated use of social media, makes it increasingly difficult to protect our youth from messaging designed to radicalize and motivate to action homegrown violent extremists.

NCTC is working closely with our partners at DHS, FBI, and DOJ to inform and equip families, communities, and local institutions who provide our best defense and ability to counter the narrative of violent extremism. Despite our efforts, HVEs remain the most likely immediate threat to the homeland.

We expect the overall level of HVE activity to remain the same over the course of the next year: We would expect to see a handful of uncoordinated and mostly unsophisticated plots emanating from a pool of up to a few hundred individuals.

Last year’s Boston Marathon bombing underscores the threat from HVEs who are motivated, often with little or no warning, to act violently by themselves or in small groups. As we have discussed with the Committee in the past, these lone actors or insular groups who act autonomously are the most difficult to detect or disrupt.

Mr. Chairman, during your April 30th hearing you noted that “identifying and deterring terrorist plots by lone wolves” was “extremely challenging,” and I think everyone here would agree with that assessment.

NCTC Efforts to Identify Foreign Fighters

Let me take one moment to talk about just one of our efforts at NCTC to counter the array of threats we face, and that is through identifying it—by putting a face and a name to that threat wherever possible. Under the law, NCTC is charged with maintaining the U.S. government’s central and shared knowledge bank of known and suspected terrorists, as well as their contacts and support networks.

NCTC’s Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment—or TIDE—is our database of known and suspected international terrorists, and it helps us ensure that all relevant information about identified individuals—such as Syrian foreign fighters—is shared with appropriate intelligence, law enforcement, and screening agencies.

We are relentless in our efforts to ensure the data in TIDE is accurately entered, and that our records are as comprehensive as possible. And we are especially mindful of privacy and civil liberties concerns, particularly with respect to U.S. persons.

In the case of U.S. persons, any nomination goes through at least four layers of review—including a legal review—to ensure the derogatory information is sufficient and meets established legal standards.

NCTC’s management of this unique consolidation of terrorist identities has created a valuable forum for identifying and sharing information with community partners, and has better integrated



our collective efforts to identify, enhance, and expedite the nomination of Syrian foreign fighters for placement in U.S. government screening systems.

This work greatly increases the chances that we will be able to disrupt potential terrorist activity by individuals seeking to return from Syria.

Closing

Members of the Committee, we face an evolving, decentralized threat from a diffuse set of actors who are adapting to our countermeasures. This is why the NCTC and its partners within the Intelligence Community must continue to adapt to this threat, within the bounds of our existing resources.

We appreciate this committee's continued support in these efforts, and I would encourage the members to visit NCTC to see first-hand the breadth of counterterrorism efforts in which we are engaged.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share with you—and the American public—our assessment of the current terrorist threat, and I look forward to answering your questions.