HEARING BEFORE THE HOUSE HOMELAND SECURITY COMMITTEE
"WORLDWIDE THREATS TO THE HOMELAND: ISIS AND THE NEW WAVE OF TERROR"

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STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

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Thank you, Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, and Members of the Committee. I appreciate this opportunity to discuss the terrorism threats that concern us most. I am pleased to join my colleagues and close partners, Secretary Jeh Johnson from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and Director James Comey of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

Over the past several years, we have had great success in strengthening our Homeland security and have made progress in reducing external threats emanating from core al-Qa'ida and the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL, due to aggressive counterterrorism (CT) action against the groups. Unfortunately, the range of threats we face has become increasingly diverse and geographically expansive, as we saw with ISIL's recent wave of attacks in Bangladesh, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. As these attacks demonstrate, ISIL's strategy is to weaken the resolve of its adversaries and project its influence worldwide through attacks and propaganda, ultimately perpetuating fear.

The continuing appeal of the violent extremist narrative and the adaptive nature of violent extremist groups continue to pose substantial challenges to the efforts of our CT community. In addition to the attacks overseas, we are no doubt reminded by the shooting in Orlando, Florida, last month that homegrown violent extremists, or HVEs, who are inspired by groups such as ISIL remain an unpredictable threat we face in the Homeland. Because HVEs are frequently lone actors, often self-initiating and self-motivating, their threats are harder to detect and, therefore, harder to prevent. But just as the threat evolves, so do we. We are constantly adapting, and we must continue to improve.

Threat Overview

The attack in Orlando underscores the importance of what we are here today to discuss and the critical nature of our vigilance against homegrown violent extremism. While the reasons for the attack in Florida become known and continue to inform how we detect and respond to these types of incidents, we remain

committed to keeping our Nation safe. The best way to combat terrorism is a whole-of-government approach, where federal, state, and local intelligence and law enforcement collaborate.

We expect some HVEs will try to replicate the violence and potentially capitalize on the media coverage and attention that attacks like the one in Florida generated. Although we do not see a large number of these types of threats at the moment, we expect to see an increase in threat reporting around the summer holidays and the large public events, celebrations, and gatherings that accompany them. We will continue to track and monitor the threats and share that information with our partners.

In the past few years, the pool of potential HVEs has expanded. As Director Comey has said, the FBI has investigations on around 1,000 potential HVEs across all 50 states. While HVEs have multiple factors driving their mobilization to violence, this increase in caseload tracks with ISIL's rise in prominence and its large-scale media and propaganda efforts to reach and influence populations worldwide. What we have seen over time is that HVEs—either lone actors or small insular groups— continue to gravitate toward simple tactics that do not require advanced skills or outside training. The majority of HVEs will likely continue to select traditional targets, such as military personnel, law enforcement, and other symbols of the US government. Some HVEs—such as the Orlando shooter in June and the San Bernardino shooters in December 2015—may have conducted attacks against personally significant targets. The convergence of violent extremist ideology and personal grievances or perceived affronts likely played a role in motivating these HVEs to attack.

As we approach 15 years since 9/11, the array of terrorist actors around the globe is broader, wider, and deeper than it has been at any time since that day. ISIL's narrative, rooted in unceasing warfare against all enemies, extends beyond the Syria-Iraq battlefield. ISIL has conducted 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 Bangladeshi law enforcement officials in a café in Bangladesh; and the bombing of a crowded commercial district in Baghdad—all of which demonstrate how ISIL can capitalize on local affiliates on the ground for attacks. The threat landscape is less predictable and, while the scale of the capabilities currently demonstrated by most of these violent extremist actors does not rise to the level that core al-Qa'ida had 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 15 years.

As we recently saw at Istanbul's Ataturk Airport and the attack in Belgium in March, terrorists remain focused on attacks against aviation because they recognize the economic damage that may result from even unsuccessful attempts to down aircraft or against airline terminals, as well as the high loss of life and the attention media devotes to these attacks. Worldwide security improvements in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks have hardened the aviation sector but have not entirely removed the threat. Violent extremist

publications continue to promote the desirability of aviation and its infrastructure for attacks and have provided information that could be used to target the air domain.

We have come to view the threat from ISIL as a spectrum, where on one end, individuals are inspired by ISIL's narrative and propaganda, and at the other end, ISIL members are giving operatives direct guidance. Unfortunately it is not always clear; sometimes ISIL members in Iraq and Syria reach out to individuals in the Homeland to enable others to conduct attacks on their behalf. More often than not, we observe a fluid picture where individuals operate somewhere between the two extremes.

ISIL's access to resources—in terms of both manpower and funds—and territorial control in areas of Syria and Iraq are the ingredients that we traditionally look to as being critical to the group's development of an external operations capability, to include their ability to threaten the Homeland. For that reason, shrinking the size of territory controlled by ISIL, and denying the group access to additional manpower in the form of foreign fighters and operatives, remains a top priority, and success in these areas will ultimately be essential to our efforts to prevent the group from operating as a terrorist organization with global reach and impact. And clearly, progress has been made in these areas. But despite this progress, it is our judgment that ISIL's ability to carry out terrorist attacks in Syria, Iraq, and abroad has not to date been significantly diminished, and the tempo of ISIL-linked terrorist activity is a reminder of the group's continued global reach.

While ISIL's efforts on the ground in Syria and Iraq remain a top priority for the group's leadership, we do not judge that that there is a direct link between the group's current battlefield status in Iraq and Syria and the group's capacity to operate as a terrorist organization with global capabilities. Their 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 completely the group's terrorism capabilities**.** As we have seen, the group has launched attacks in periods in which the group held large swaths of territory as well as during the past few weeks, as the group feels increasing pressure from the counter-ISIL campaign. In addition to their efforts to conduct external attacks from their safe havens in Iraq and Syria, ISIL'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.

ISIL spokesman Abu Muhammad Adnani's most recent public statement—which encourages ISIL supporters in the US to conduct attacks in their home countries instead of traveling to Iraq and Syria— may suggest that ISIL recognizes the difficulty in sending operatives to the Homeland for an attack. ISIL likely views the US as a harder target than Europe due to Europe's proximity to the conflict. US ports of entry are under far less strain from mass migration, and US law enforcement agencies are not overtaxed by persistent unrest, as some of our counterparts are overseas.

In Europe, we are concerned about ISIL's demonstrated ability to conduct coordinated attacks by deploying operatives from Syria and Iraq and leveraging European jihadist networks. ISIL attacks in Paris in November and Brussels in March revealed several factors that could enable future operations. First, the role of ISIL's cadre of foreign fighters in planning and executing external operations is key. As we know, several of the Paris and Brussels attackers had experience fighting in Syria, including Paris attack coordinator and operative Abdelhamid Abaaoud.

A second factor that has contributed to ISIL's successful attacks in Europe is the flexibility of their operatives. Those serving as facilitators can transition to attackers for different operations. Some of the Brussels attackers supported the Paris attacks by providing explosives and transportation for operatives. This is a dynamic that the US Government must consider in order to effectively aid our European counterparts in identifying and disrupting future attacks. Finally, ISIL's leveraging of criminal, familial, and communal ties contributes to its ability to advance plotting in Europe. Many operatives involved in the attacks in Paris and Brussels share a similar story of getting involved in criminal activities before becoming radicalized to violence.

Similar to the HVE challenge we face, Europe-based individuals have responded to ISIL's violent message and act on the group's behalf. A violent extremist attacked a police officer and his wife last month in France and pledged his allegiance to ISIL amir Abubakr al-Baghdadi during the hostage situation through a live-streaming social media service.

Last year we confirmed that ISIL had successfully sent several operatives—including at least two of the Paris attackers—from Syria to Western Europe by having them blend in with the flow of some 1 million migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees who traveled from Turkey to Greece in 2015. Although ISIL most likely will continue to seek opportunities to infiltrate these Europe-bound flows when it is operationally expedient to do so, the group probably would prefer other options to deploy operatives to the Homeland because of the relative difficulties to entering the US via the US Refugee Admissions Program. Specifically, applicants have little-to-no control as to whether the UN will refer them for consideration by the US Refugee Admissions Program. Those refugees who are referred to the US Refugee Admissions Program are then subjected to a process for resettlement of refugees administered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

To ensure proper scrutiny of refugee applicants referred to the US by the UNHCR, the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) has worked extensively with the screening community to deliver a comprehensive, end-to-end refugee vetting system that streamlines operations without compromising safety, removes stovepipes, and increases transparency across the board. This screening is just one part of a

comprehensive system of checks—including the participation of the Departments of Homeland Security, State, Defense, and the FBI as well as additional intelligence agencies—that includes extensive in-person overseas interviews, biographic and biometric assessments, and recurrent vetting.

NCTC screening is done in two ways: The first is identity resolution. We utilize automated programs to correlate biographic information of refugee applicants against the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment, the US Government's central repository of international terrorist information, for potential matches. All of these computer-generated matches are reviewed by analysts trained to resolve identities. We access other Intelligence Community (IC) holdings to then validate those findings.

The second way is our screening against IC holdings. We screen applicant biographic information against the IC holdings to identify any possible matches to raw intelligence reporting and then conduct analysis to determine any nexus to terrorism.

The tremendous efforts we are undertaking to counter the ISIL threat are absolutely warranted, but I want to stress that we still view al-Qa'ida and the various al-Qa'ida affiliates and nodes as a principal counterterrorism priority. For example, while ISIL is driving most terrorist threats against Europe, we know that the pressures we face on the Continent are not limited to ISIL. The attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine office in Paris by individuals linked to AQAP in January 2015 is a key example of the broad violent extremist threat facing Europe. We would not tier our priorities in such a way that downgrades al-Qa'ida in favor of a greater focus on ISIL. When we are looking at the terrorism threats that we face as a nation, including to the Homeland, al-Qa'ida still figures prominently in that analysis.

We are particularly concerned about al-Qa'ida's safe haven in Syria because we know al-Qa'ida is trying to strengthen its global networks by relocating some of its remaining leadership cadre from South Asia to Syria. These leaders include some who have been part of the group since before the September 11 attacks and, once in Syria, we believe they will work with the al-Qa'ida affiliate there—the Nusrah Front—to threaten the US and our allies.

The Nusrah Front 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. In April, the US military successfully targeted some of the Nusrah Front's senior members, including long-time al-Qa'ida member and former spokesman for the group in Syria, Abu Firas al-Suri. We will remain vigilant in our efforts to counter this group and the threats it poses to the West.

We believe we have constrained the group's effectiveness and their ability to recruit, train, and deploy operatives from their 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 assess that al-Qa'ida and its adherents in the region still aspire to conduct attacks and, so long as the group can potentially regenerate capability to threaten the Homeland with large-scale attacks, al-Qa'ida will remain a threat. Al-Qa'ida's allies in South Asia—particularly the Haqqani Taliban Network—also continue to present a high threat to our regional interests.

The IC is cognizant to the level of risk the US may face over time if al-Qa'ida regenerates, finds renewed safe haven, or restores lost capability. We are very much 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. I am confident that the US Government will retain sufficient capability to continue to put pressure on that core al-Qa'ida network and therefore reduce the risk of a resurgence by al-Qa'ida in the region.

We also see increasing competition between violent extremist actors within South Asia itself, between and among the Taliban, ISIL's branch in South Asia, and al-Qa'ida. This is an additional dynamic that we are working to understand. While conflict among terrorist groups may well distract them from their core mission of plotting attacks against Western targets, conflict also serves to introduce a degree of uncertainty into the terrorism landscape that raises questions that I don't think we have answers to yet. This is something we are watching very closely.

Stepping back, there are two trends in the contemporary threat environment that concern us most. First is the increasing ability of terrorist actors to communicate with each other outside our reach with the use of encrypted communications. As a result, collecting precise intelligence on terrorist intentions and the status of particular terrorist plots is increasingly difficult.

There are several reasons for this: exposure of intelligence collection techniques, disclosures of classified information that have given terrorist groups a better understanding of how we collect intelligence, and terrorist groups' innovative and agile use of new means of communicating, including ways that are sometimes beyond our ability to collect, known as "going dark."

Second, while we've seen a decrease in the frequency of large-scale, complex plotting efforts that sometimes span several years, we're instead seeing a proliferation of more rapidly evolving threat or plot vectors that emerge simply by an individual encouraged to take action who then quickly gathers the few resources needed and moves into an operational phase. The so-called "flash-to-bang" ratio—the time between when an individual decides to attack and when the attack occurs—in plotting of this sort is extremely

compressed and allows little time for traditional law enforcement and intelligence tools to disrupt or mitigate potential plots.

ISIL 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, they can be effective, especially if they believe they cannot travel abroad to ISIL-controlled areas. In terms of propaganda and recruitment, ISIL supporters can generate further support for their movement, even without carrying out catastrophic, mass-casualty attacks. And that's an innovation in the terrorist playbook that poses a great challenge.

Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)

The 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 counter the appeal of terrorism and dissuade individuals from joining them in the first place.

To this end, as announced in January 2016, the Countering Violent Extremism Task Force was stood up to organize federal CVE efforts. The CVE Task Force will be led by the Department of Homeland Security for the first two years; afterward, the Department of Justice will assume leadership. It will be staffed by multiple departments and agencies, including the FBI and NCTC. The main objectives of the task force are to coordinate federal support for ongoing and future research, and establish feedback mechanisms to incorporate sound results; synchronize federal government outreach to, and engagement with, CVE stakeholders and provide technical assistance to CVE practitioners; manage and leverage digital technologies to engage, empower, and connect CVE stakeholders; and work with CVE stakeholders to develop intervention programs.

NCTC continues 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 US, with the goal of giving communities the information and tools they need to see violent extremism in their midst and do something about it before it manifests itself. NCTC, in direct collaboration with DHS and the inter-agency team, has led the creation of CVE tools to build community resilience across the country.

NCTC has sent our officers on multiple occasions to meet with the communities in places such as Denver, Sacramento, Buffalo, and Minneapolis to raise awareness among community and law enforcement audiences about the terrorist recruitment threat. Our briefing 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. The Community Resilience Exercise, a tabletop 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, aims to encourage the creation of intervention models at the local level. In the same way that local partners, including law enforcement, schools, social service providers, and communities, have come together to provide alternative pathways and off-ramps for people who might be vulnerable to joining a gang, we are encouraging our local partners to implement similar models for violent extremism. The more resilient the community, the less likely its members are to join a violent extremist group.

Conclusion

Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you this morning. As we are reminded by the events in Florida as well as globally just a couple of weeks ago, the role that NCTC, FBI, and DHS play in combating terrorism, along with this Committee's support, is critically important. I know the collaboration among all the agencies represented here will continue over the months and years to come in order to continue to protect the Homeland.

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