

Hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee

The Spread of ISIS and Transnational Terrorism

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Thank you Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, and distinguished members of the Committee. I am honored to have this opportunity to appear before you to discuss the spread of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and the threat from transnational terrorism.

We meet this morning in the wake of the horrific attacks in Brussels last month and the recent attacks Paris and in San Bernardino late last year. These massacres serve both as a sobering reminder of the complexity of the threats we face from terrorist groups of global reach and as a call for action in the ongoing struggle against terrorism. Indeed, these attacks give this hearing added significance, as you convene to examine the threat to the United States and our interests around the world and the steps we should take to counter terrorist groups both at home and abroad.

By any measure, ISIS presents the most urgent threat to our security in the world today. The group has exploited the conflict in Syria and sectarian tensions in Iraq to entrench itself in both countries, now spanning the geographic center of the Middle East. Using both terrorist and insurgent tactics, the group has seized and is governing territory, while at the same time securing the allegiance of allied terrorist groups across the Middle East and North Africa. ISIS's sanctuary enables it to recruit, train, and execute external attacks, as we have now seen in Europe, and to incite assailants around the world. It has recruited thousands of militants to join its fight in the region and uses its propaganda campaign to radicalize countless others in the West. And at the same time, we continue to face an enduring threat from al Qaida and its affiliates, who maintain the intent and capacity to carry out attacks in the West.

In my remarks today, I will focus first on the nature of the terrorist threat from transnational terrorist groups, focusing on ISIS and al-Qaida. I then will address some of the key elements of the strategy to degrade and defeat these groups, as well as the challenges we face ahead.

The Spread of ISIS

Let me begin with the spread of ISIS from its roots in Iraq. ISIS traces its origin to the veteran Sunni terrorist, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, who founded the group in 2004 and pledged his allegiance to bin Laden. Al Qaeda in Iraq, as it was then known, targeted U.S. forces and civilians to pressure the United States and other countries to leave Iraq and gained a reputation for brutality and tyranny.

In 2007, the group's continued targeting and repression of Sunni civilians in Iraq caused a widespread backlash—often referred to as the Sunni Awakening—against the group. This coincided with a surge in U.S. and coalition forces and Iraq counterterrorism operations that ultimately denied ISIS safe haven and led to a sharp decrease in its attack tempo. Then in 2011, the group began to reconstitute itself amid growing Sunni discontent and the civil war in Syria. In 2012, ISIS conducted an average of 5-10 suicide attacks in Iraq per month, an attack tempo that grew to 30-40 attacks per month in 2013.

While gaining strength in Iraq, ISIS exploited the conflict and chaos in Syria to expand its operations across the border. The group established the al-Nusrah Front as a cover for its activities in Syria, and in April 2013, the group publicly declared its presence in Syria under the ISIS name. Al-Nusrah leaders immediately rejected ISIS's announcement and publicly pledged allegiance to al-Qaida. And by February 2014, al-Qaida declared that ISIS was no longer a branch of the group.

At the same time, ISIS accelerated its efforts to remove Iraqi and Syrian government control of key portions of their respective territories, seizing control of Raqqa, Syria, and Fallujah, Iraq, in January 2014. The group marched from its safe haven in Syria, across the border into northern Iraq, slaughtering thousands of Iraqi Muslims, Sunni and Shia alike, on its way to seizing Mosul in June 2014. Through these battlefield victories, the group gained weapons, equipment, and territory, as well as an extensive war chest. In the summer of 2014, ISIS declared the establishment of an Islamic caliphate under the name the "Islamic State" and called for all Muslims to pledge support to the group and its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Three overarching factors account for the rise and rapid success of ISIS over the past three years.

First, ISIS has exploited the civil war in Syria and the lack of security in northern Iraq to establish a safe haven. At the same time, Assad's brutal suppression of the Syrian people acted as a magnet for extremists and foreign fighters. In western Iraq, the withdrawal of security forces during the initial military engagements with ISIS left swaths of territory ungoverned. ISIS has used these areas to establish sanctuaries in Syria and Iraq from where the group could amass and coordinate fighters and resources with little interference. With virtually no security forces along the Iraq-Syria border, ISIS was able to move personnel and supplies with ease within its held territories.

Second, ISIS has proven to be an effective fighting force. Its battlefield strategy employs a mix of terrorist operations, hit-and-run tactics, and paramilitary assaults to enable the group's rapid gains. These battlefield advances, in turn, sparked other Sunni insurgents into action, and they have helped the group hold and administer territory. Disaffected Sunnis have had few alternatives in Iraq or Syria. The leadership in both countries has pushed them to the sidelines in the political process for years, failing to address their grievances. ISIS has been recruiting these young Sunnis to fight. Since September 2014, the U.S.-led military coalition has halted ISIS's momentum and

reversed the group's territorial gains, but ISIS has sought to adapt its tactics in the face of coalition air strikes.

Third, ISIS views itself as the new leader of the global jihad. The group has developed an unprecedented ability to communicate with its followers worldwide. It operates the most sophisticated propaganda machine of any terrorist group. ISIS disseminates timely, high-quality media content on multiple platforms, including on social media, designed to secure a widespread following for the group. ISIS uses a range of media to tout its military capabilities, executions of captured soldiers, and battlefield victories.

ISIS's media campaign also is aimed at drawing foreign fighters to the group, including many from Western countries. The media campaign also allows ISIS to recruit new fighters to conduct independent or inspired attacks in the West. ISIS's propaganda outlets include multiple websites, active Twitter feeds, YouTube channels, and online chat rooms. ISIS uses these platforms to radicalize and mobilize potential operatives in the United States and elsewhere. The group's supporters have sustained this momentum on social media by encouraging attacks in the United States and against U.S. interests in retaliation for our airstrikes. As a result, ISIS threatens to outpace al-Qaida as the dominant voice of influence in the global extremist movement.

The Threat from ISIS Today

Today, ISIS reportedly has between 20,000 and 25,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria, an overall decrease from the number of fighters in 2014. ISIS controls much of the Tigris-Euphrates basin. Significantly, however, ISIS's frontlines in parts of northern and central Iraq and northern Syria have been pushed back, according to the Defense Department, and ISIS probably can no longer operate openly in approximately 25 to 30 percent of populated areas in Iraq and Syria that it dominated in August 2014.

ISIS also has branched out, taking advantage of the chaos and lack of security in countries like Yemen to Libya to expand to new territory and enlist new followers. ISIS can now claim formal alliances with eight affiliated groups across an arc of instability and unrest stretching from the Middle East across North Africa.

Libya is the most prominent example of the expansion of ISIS. There, ISIS's forces include as many as 6,500 fighters, who have captured the town of Sirte and 150-miles of coastline over the past year. This provides ISIS with a relatively safe base from which to attract new recruits and execute attacks elsewhere, including on Libya's oil facilities. In addition, ISIS has proven its ability to conduct operations in western Libya, including a suicide bombing at a police training, which killed at least 60 people earlier this year.

From this position, ISIS poses a multi-faceted threat to Europe and to the United States. The strategic goal of ISIS remains to establish an Islamic caliphate through armed conflict with governments it considers apostate—including European nations and the

United States. In early 2014, ISIS's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi warned that the United States will soon "be in direct conflict" with the group. In September 2014, the group's spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani released a speech instructing supporters to kill disbelievers in Western countries "in any manner or way," without traveling to Syria or waiting for direction.

ISIS has established an external operations organization under Adnani's leadership. This unit reportedly is a distinct body inside ISIS responsible for identifying recruits, supplying training and cash, and arranging for the delivery of weapons. The unit's main focus has been Europe, but it also has directed deadly attacks outside Europe, including in Turkey, Egypt, Tunisia and Lebanon.

A recent New York Times report attributes 1,200 deaths to ISIS outside Iraq and Syria, and about half of the dead have been local civilians in Arab countries, many killed in attacks on mosques and government offices. In the past two years ISIS reportedly has directed or inspired more than 80 external attacks in as many as 20 nations. And ISIS has carried out or inspired at least 29 deadly assaults targeting Westerners around the world, killing more than 650 people.

Most concerning, the recent attacks in Brussels and Paris demonstrate that ISIS now has both the intent and capability to direct and execute sophisticated attacks in Western Europe. These attacks reflect an alarming trend. Over the past year, ISIS has increased the complexity, severity, and pace of its external attacks. The Brussels and Paris attacks were not simply inspired by ISIS, but rather they were ISIS-planned and directed. And they were conducted as part of a coordinated effort to maximize casualties by striking some of the most vulnerable targets in the West: a train station and airport in Brussels, and a nightclub, cafe, and sporting arena in Paris. Further, recent reports that ISIS has used chemical weapons in Syria, and that it conducted surveillance of Belgium nuclear facilities, raise the specter that the group is intent on using weapons of mass destruction.

In the United States, the threat from ISIS is on a smaller scale but persistent. We have experienced attacks that ISIS has inspired—including the attacks in San Bernardino and in Garland, Texas—and there has been an overall uptick over the past year in the number of moderate-to-small scale plots. Lone actors or insular groups—often self-directed or inspired by overseas groups, like ISIS—pose the most serious threat to carry out attacks here. Homegrown violent extremists will likely continue gravitating to simpler plots that do not require advanced skills, outside training, or communication with others. The online environment serves a critical role in radicalizing and mobilizing homegrown extremists towards violence. Highlighting the challenge this presents, the FBI Director said last year that the FBI has homegrown violent extremist cases, totaling about 900, in every state. Most of these cases are connected to ISIS.

Several factors are driving this trend toward the increasing pace and scale of terrorist-related violence. First, the sheer number of number of Europeans and other Westerners who have gone to Syria to fight in the conflict and to join ISIS is supplying a

steady flow of operatives to the group. Reports indicate that more than 6,000 Europeans—including many French, German, British, and Belgian nationals—have travelled to Syria to join the fight. This is part of the total of approximately 40,000 foreign fighters in the region. Among the Europeans who have left for Syria, several hundred fighters have returned to their home countries, typically battle-hardened, trained, and further radicalized. The number of Americans who have travelled to Syria or Iraq, or have tried to, exceeds 250.

As such, we should not underestimate the potential of an ISIS-directed attack in the United States. While the principal threat from ISIS in the United States is from homegrown, ISIS-inspired actors, the fact that so many Americans have travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight, along with thousands more from visa waiver countries in Europe, raises the real concern that these individuals could be deployed here to conduct attacks similar to the attacks in Paris and Brussels.

Second, ISIS has developed more advanced tactics in planning and executing these attacks. In both Brussels and Paris, the operatives staged coordinated attacks at multiple sites, effectively hampering police responses. The militants exploited weaknesses in Europe's border controls in order to move relatively freely from Syria to France and Belgium. The group has also moved away from previous efforts to attack symbolically significant targets—such as the 2014 attack on a Jewish museum in Brussels—and appears to have adopted the guidance of a senior ISIS operative in the group's online magazine, who directed followers “to stop looking for specific targets” and to “hit everyone and everything.” Further, the explosives used in Paris and likely in Brussels indicate the terrorists have achieved a level of proficiency in bomb making. The use of TATP in Paris and the discovery of the material in raids in Brussels suggest that the operatives have received sophisticated explosives training, possibly in Syria

Third, existing networks of extremists in Europe are providing the infrastructure to support the execution of attacks there. The investigations of the Paris and Belgium attacks have revealed embedded radical networks that supply foreign fighters to ISIS in Syria and operatives and logistical support for the terrorist attacks in those cities. While such entrenched and isolated networks are not present in the United States, ISIS continues to target Americans for recruitment, including through the use of focused social media, in order to identify and mobilize operatives here.

Looking more broadly, the rise of ISIS should be viewed as a manifestation of the transformation of the global jihadist movement over the past several years. We have seen this movement diversify and expand in the aftermath of the upheaval and political chaos in the Arab world since 2010. Instability and unrest in large parts of the Middle East and North Africa have led to a lack of security, border control, and effective governance. In the last few years, four states—Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen—have effectively collapsed. ISIS and other terrorist groups exploit these conditions to expand their reach and establish safe havens. As a result, the threat now comes from a decentralized array of organizations and networks, with ISIS being the group that presents the most urgent threat today.

Specifically, Al-Qaida core continues to support attacking the West and is vying with ISIS to be the recognized leader of the global jihad. There is no doubt that sustained U.S. counterterrorism pressure has led to the steady elimination of al-Qaida's senior leaders and limited the group's ability to operate, train, and recruit operatives. At the same time, the core leadership of al-Qaida continues to wield substantial influence over affiliated and allied groups, such as Yemen-based al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula. On three occasions over the past several years, AQAP has sought to bring down an airliner bound for the United States. And there is reason to believe it still harbors the intent and substantial capability to carry out such a plot.

In Syria, veteran al-Qaida fighters have traveled from Pakistan to take advantage of the permissive operating environment and access to foreign fighters. They are focused on plotting against the West. Al-Shabaab also maintains a safe haven in Somalia and threatens U.S. interests in the region, asserting the aim of creating a caliphate across east Africa. The group has reportedly increased its recruitment in Kenya and aims to destabilize parts of Kenya. Finally, AQIM (and its splinter groups) and Boko Haram—now an official branch of ISIS—continue to maintain their base of operations in North and West Africa and have demonstrated sustained capabilities to carry out deadly attacks against civilian targets.

The Strategy To Defeat ISIS

Against this backdrop, I will briefly address the current strategy to confront and ultimately defeat ISIS. As formidable as ISIS has become, the group is vulnerable. Indeed, the U.S.-led military campaign has killed thousands of ISIS fighters and rolled back ISIS's territorial gains in parts of Iraq and Syria. ISIS has not had any major strategic military victories in Iraq or Syria for almost a year. As ISIS loses its hold on territory, its claim that it has established the "caliphate" will be eroded, and the group will lose its central appeal.

On the military front, a coalition of twelve nations has conducted more than 8,700 airstrikes in Syria and Iraq, according to the Defense Department. These strikes have taken out a range of targets, including ISIS vehicles, weaponry, training camps, oil infrastructure, and artillery positions. In addition, several nations have joined the United States in deploying military personal to assist the Iraqi government, training more than 17,000 Iraqi security forces.

The military effort also has included the successful targeting of ISIS leaders. United States special operations forces have gone into Syria to support the fight against ISIS, bringing a unique set of capabilities, such as intelligence gathering, enabling local forces, and targeting high-value ISIS operatives and leaders.

From a counterterrorism perspective, the United States is pursuing multiple lines of effort. First, the United States is focusing on stemming the flow of foreign fighters to Syria, and disrupting ISIS's financial networks. The government reports that at least 50

countries plus the United Nations now contribute foreign terrorist fighter profiles to INTERPOL, and the United States has bilateral arrangements with 40 international partners for sharing terrorist travel information. In 2015, the U.S. government sanctioned more than 30 ISIS-linked senior leaders, financiers, foreign terrorist facilitators, and organizations, helping isolate ISIS from the international financial system. In addition, since 2014, the FBI has arrested approximately 65 individuals in ISIS-related criminal matters.

Second, to counter ISIS propaganda, the United States is strengthening its efforts to prevent ISIS from radicalizing and mobilizing recruits. The White House recently announced the creation of an interagency countering violent extremism (CVE) task force under the leadership of the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Justice, with additional staffing from the FBI and National Counterterrorism Center. The CVE task force is charged with the integrating whole-of-government programs and activities and establishing new CVE efforts. As part of this initiative, the DHS Office for Community Partnerships is developing innovative ways to support communities that seek to discourage violent extremism and to undercut terrorist narratives.

Third, and more broadly, the United States continues to lead the international diplomatic effort to resolve the underlying conflicts in the region. This includes working toward a negotiated political transition that removes Bashar al-Asad from power and ultimately leads to an inclusive government that is responsive to the needs of all Syrians. This effort also includes supporting the Iraqi government's progress toward effective and inclusive governance, stabilization efforts, and reconciliation.

To augment this strategy, there are a number of initiatives that merit consideration.

One is a surge in our intelligence capabilities. Such a surge should include enhancing our technical surveillance capabilities, providing additional resources for the development of sources to penetrate ISIS, and fostering closer relationships with intelligence services in the region. This focus on intelligence collection would help address the fact that our law enforcement and intelligence agencies have found it increasingly difficult to collect specific intelligence on terrorist intentions and plots. This intelligence gap is due in part to the widespread availability and adoption of encrypted communication technology. Indeed, ISIS has released a how-to manual to its followers on the use of encryption to avoid detection. The gap also is the result of the illegal disclosures of our intelligence collection methods and techniques. These disclosures have provided terrorists with a roadmap on how to evade our surveillance. Therefore, rebuilding our intelligence capabilities should be an imperative.

Next, the United States should continue to work in concert with European partners and support Europe's effort to break down barriers to information sharing among agencies and among nations and to strengthen border controls. Today, European nations do not always alert each other when they encounter a terrorism suspect at a border. Europe should incorporate the lessons we learned after 9/11 and adopt structural changes

that enable sharing of information between law enforcement and intelligence agencies and that support watchlisting of suspected terrorists.

Finally, the United States should redouble its efforts to counter ISIS on the ideological front. This begins with a recognition that the United States, along with nations in Europe, must build and maintain trust and strong relationships with Muslim communities who are on the front lines of the fight against radicalization. This also means we must reject unambiguously the hateful rhetoric that erodes that trust. The U.S. strategy should focus on empowering Muslim American communities to confront extremist ideology, working to galvanize and amplify networks of people, both in the government and private sector, to confront ISIS's ideology of oppression and violence. While the government has made strides in this direction, the pace and scale of the effort has not matched the threat.

Conclusion

In the wake of the terrorist attacks in Europe and here in the United States, our continued focus on ISIS and transnational terrorist threats is absolutely warranted. We should not underestimate the capacity of ISIS and other groups to adapt and evade our defenses and to carry out acts of violence, both here at home and around the world.

But no terrorist group is invincible. The enduring lessons of 9/11 are that we can overcome and defeat the threat of terrorism through strength, unity, and adherence to our founding values, and that American leadership is indispensable to this fight.

I look forward to answering your questions.