Ambassador Daniel Benjamin
The Future of Counterterrorism Strategy
Testimony Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
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Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, Distinguished Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today, and thank you, as well, for holding a hearing on the vitally important subject of counterterrorism strategy. As we approach the beginning of a new administration, and as we watch events unfold in the Middle East and the continuing damage being done to ISIS, key questions about our future plans and orientation are on the table.

Let me begin by noting that over the past several years, the United States has made significant progress against the major jihadist terrorist groups in the extraordinarily complicated and roiled world that was created by the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the Arab uprisings of 2011 and after. Nonetheless, today, the range of threats we face has become increasingly diverse and more widely distributed geographically. The continuing appeal of the jihadist narrative and the adaptive nature of these groups pose an enduring challenge to our national security.[1]

In sheer numbers, global terrorist violence rose dramatically in 2011-2014, with the number of fatalities roughly tripling in this period to about 33,000. In 2015, the incidence of attacks declined somewhat, and that appears to be continuing this year, but the overall level of violence in historic terms remains very high. The proximate drivers of this development have been the rise of ISIS, several ISIS affiliates and Boko Haram, which has declared its loyalty to ISIS.

At home, the San Bernardino and Orlando attacks more than doubled the total number of jihadist-related deaths in the United States since the attacks of 9/11 to 94. That number, judged by any reasonable standard, is low and a testament to the extraordinary measures the nation has taken since 2001 in law enforcement, intelligence, immigration and military operations. It also reflects the high level of integration of American Muslims, who have remained largely immune to the call of extremism. Indeed, if we consider that there were upwards of 225,000 homicides in the nation in 2002-2016, the American populace has been remarkably well protected from this form of violence — even if the public discussion of the terrorist threat does not reflect this level of security. I say that recognizing full well that terrorist attacks carry a unique and peculiar horror, and that their toll must also be reckoned in terms of public confidence in our institutions and perceptions our global standing. I would add, by the way, that most analysts agree that the nation is considerably safer from unconventional attack than it was during the years after 9/11, when al Qaeda remained interested in acquiring and using weapons of mass destruction.

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[1] I wish to thank Rand Beers, former Under Secretary of Homeland Security, Matt Olsen, former director of the National Counterterrorism Center and Eric Rosand, former senior staff member of the State Department's Counterterrorism Bureau for their contributions to this testimony. All conclusions and errors are of course my own.

Nonetheless, in the minds of many Americans, the aggregate threat has grown markedly because of the surge of attacks in the United States and Europe during the period of ISIS's ascendance.

ISIS today is on the defensive, having lost some 55 per cent of the inhabited territory it captured in Iraq in 2014, but the group still presents a persistent and critical threat. It has exploited the conflict in Syria and sectarian tensions in Iraq to entrench itself in an area at 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 other 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. Most important, ISIS's core idea of creating a caliphate — an authentically Islamic polity — and its record of capturing and governing territory has galvanized extremists in a way that Usama bin Laden's al Qaeda never could. It has recruited tens of thousands of militants to join its campaign in the region and to become cadres for bringing the fight back to their home countries. The group also uses its propaganda campaign to radicalize others around the world through a sophisticated set of online approaches.

Recent attacks in Europe further demonstrate that ISIS now has the intent and capability to direct and execute sophisticated attacks far from its territory. Over the past year, ISIS has increased the complexity and pace of its external attacks, which are not merely inspired but planned, directed and executed by ISIS personnel with a clear intention to maximize casualties by striking highly vulnerable targets. The Mumbai-like multi-pronged attack in Paris in November 2015 and the multiple bombings in Brussels in March exposed the weakness of French and Belgian counterterrorism capabilities and the large majority of European nations are unlikely to do much better. The continent also faces a protracted struggle with homegrown extremism, as the Charlie Hebdo and Nice attacks indicate, as well as many foiled plots elsewhere. As ISIS territory comes under greater pressure, the incentive to carry out terrorist attacks "out of area" will continue to grow, and with more foreign fighters returning to their home countries, the chances of such events will grow. Recent reports that ISIS has used chemical weapons in Syria, and that it conducted surveillance of Belgian nuclear facilities raise the new specter that the group may be developing an interest in weapons of mass destruction.

In the United States, the threat from ISIS has been on a smaller scale. The rise of ISIS almost certainly drove the perpetrators of the San Bernardino and Orlando killings, even if the group had no hand in command-and-control, and there has been an 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 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, Director Comey said last year that the FBI has roughly 900 cases homegrown violent extremist cases, including at least one in every state. Most of these cases are connected to ISIS. [2]

[2] Although it has dominated the terrorism landscape since 2014, ISIS is by no means alone in threatening peace and stability around the globe. We continue to face an enduring threat from al Qaida and its affiliates, who maintain the intent and capacity to carry out attacks against

Although the battle for Mosul continues — and the humanitarian toll there has been appalling – ISIS is unlikely to be able to reverse its decline. The number of fighters migrating to ISIS controlled territory has dropped dramatically, reportedly from a peak of 2000 a month down to 50, and the group's financial resources are under enormous strain. The U.S.-led military campaign has killed thousands of ISIS fighters and significantly 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 over 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 much of its distinctive appeal. Outside of the Iraqi/Syrian theater, the US carries out regular attacks on ISIS targets in Libya in coordination with the Government of National Accord.

Terrorism has its own political economy, and for ISIS to retain its mantle of leadership in the jihadist movement, it must achieve successes that offset and distract from its military setbacks. Many of those efforts are likely to be in Iraq and Syria, since the local forces' ability to hold and police reconquered territory will be limited. Continuing sectarian polarization in the region will mean that, however unattractive they may find ISIS, many Sunnis will support it as a counter to the Shia dominated government in Baghdad and Shia militias. Major population centers — including Baghdad and other cities relatively distant from ISIS-controlled areas — are likely to see considerable terrorist violence.

ISIS understands well that another means to maintain its status is to strike "out of area" — especially in Europe and, if possible, North America. As it loses its grip on lands held since 2014, the operational tempo for such attacks could well increase, and the potential for impact is great. The increase in jihadist violence in Europe – both ISIS-organized and lone wolf — has caught our allies unprepared. Without a catalytic experience like 9/11, continental Europeans have underfunded intelligence and law enforcement for years, paid too little attention to radicalization in their midst, and failed to integrate their efforts across national boundaries. As ISIS decays, the danger from returning foreign fighters will increase. Weak external borders and the Schengen regime, decades of failed integration policies, the migration crisis, the rise of populist politics, and petty rivalries between intelligence and law enforcement have all aggravated the situation.

Here in the U.S. the picture is different. Contrary to what the President-elect maintained throughout the recent campaign, we do not "have a dysfunctional immigration system…[that] does not permit us to know who we let into our country." Rather, we have a highly sophisticated system with many layers. Its procedures have been steadily expanded and refined to the point where it bears little resemblance to the system whose vulnerabilities were exposed on 9/11. It is, of course, a human system, so we will undoubtedly find new shortcomings in future. We must innovate constantly. But it is worth recalling that not a single terrorism-related death since 9/11

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the West. Indeed, the al Qaida network has seen itself eclipsed by ISIS and harbors a strong desire to recoup its position as the leader of the global jihad, which it could only achieve through a sustained campaign of terrorist attacks. Al Shabaab remains a formidable presence in Somalia and continues to carry out attacks across East Africa, especially against AMISOM contributor nations. The Nigerian government of President Muhammadu Bouhari has made significant inroads against Boko Haram, but the group continues to pose a major challenge within the country and throughout its region. Lashkar-e-Tayyba's potential for precipitating a crisis in South Asia has been demonstrated anew by the current round of Indo-Pakistani tensions. Thus, it is worth recalling that just at the Obama Administration discovered in 2009 that the threat posed by al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula was far greater than the Bush Administration had recognized, unwelcome surprises are likely to be the norm for years to come, not the exception.

was caused by foreign operatives coming into the country to cause violence. From Fort Hood to Orlando, the killings were all caused by citizens and green card holders. So the principal danger will remain from homegrown extremists, especially those who operate alone or in very small groups. Although, as has been detailed in the press, the U.S. has become more effective at targeting online recruiters, we should expect that ISIS will step up its efforts to incite sympathizers in the country to carry out "individual acts of jihad."

We should expect that danger to grow if the tone and approach of the new administration resembles in any way the tone and approach of the Trump campaign. The U.S. public had already been subjected to an enormous amount of fear-mongering while ISIS was on the rise in 2014. But threats to cut off all Muslim immigration, to restore waterboarding and other forms of torture, to create a national registry of Muslims, to kill the families of terrorists all have contributed to a profound unsettling of American Muslim communities. So too do now famous tweets from incoming National Security Advisor Mike Flynn saying, for example that, "Fear of Muslims is RATIONAL."

All this demagoguery may have made for effective electoral politics, as political scientists have observed, but it will undermine our security in far-reaching ways. Intelligence and law enforcement do a great deal to prevent attack, but it is also because of the relatively well-integrated American Muslim community, which has been largely immune to extremism, that the number of terrorism victims at home is so low. That is true in two important ways: First, American Muslims are much less likely to become radicalized. Using travel to ISIS territories as a proxy, American Muslims are about one-third as likely to become extremists as their European co-religionists. Second, American Muslims provide law enforcement with a large volume of tips that lead to arrests in terrorism cases — according to some estimates, almost half of such information. If these communities feel that the authorities are not on their side, then there will be fewer tips and, of course, more radicalization. The sense of isolation that community leaders have expressed is a danger sign that should be heeded. The spike in anti-Muslim hate crime that has accompanied the presidential campaign provides yet another reason for concern and course correction. Otherwise, we are clearing the way for increased jihadist recruitment in the U.S., which we will come to regret.

Let me turn to our strategy going forward. The U.S. will of course need to continue to use a variety of tools, some of which we have mastered, others that require innovation. It is difficult to predict precisely how the jihadi threat will evolve. One thing that we can rule out with some confidence is that the diminution and even defeat of ISIS will lead to a large-scale reduction in the jihadi threat. We have the military might to dramatically affect individual groups, but no amount of military strength will eliminate the jihadist movement.

To begin with, as long as the fires of the conflict in Syria burn, radicalization will also continue. In this context, it is worth noting that a policy along the lines suggested by President-Elect Trump in Syria – to include working with Russia against jihadis and, as inevitably would be the case, the Syrian opposition – would exacerbate matters. If our Sunni partners in such countries as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and elsewhere see the U.S. siding with Russia, and, by extension, with Syria and Iran, it will cause a deeper rift in our already strained relations, and may cause them to abandon all restraint regarding who they arm and fund in the Syrian civil war.

Needless to say, this would be disastrous for our efforts to bring peace to Syria or to limit radicalization.

While ISIS looms large in the constellation of bad actors today, we need to keep sight of the larger historical developments that have spawned the jihadist movement. Poor governance in most of the Arab world, chronic economic underperformance, marginalization and alienation of youth, the Arab uprisings of 2011-2012 and consequent weakening and/or failure of multiple states have created opportunities for the extremists that far surpass anything seen in the past. The overlapping Sunni-Shia split/regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has further energized militants and created precisely the kind of conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen that breed extremists who will direct their violence against the West as well as sectarian opponents. The kind of upheaval we see in Libya, a country that had all its institutions destroyed under Qaddafi, provides another kind of venue for dangerous radicalization. In Europe, the failure to integrate immigrants, youth unemployment, and discrimination will continue to feed extremism. Defeating ISIS in Iraq and Syria so it can no longer hold territory will help quell global extremist sentiment. But even if the group is decisively set back, we can expect additional violent jihadist groups to emerge for many years to come. We cannot exclude the possibility of a revival of al Qaeda, perhaps growing out of the turmoil in Yemen. We also should not rule out the emergence of an entirely new generation of jihadist threats, which might, for example, emanate from the growing crisis of governance and repression in Egypt. The threat, in short, will confront us for many years to come.

It is, nonetheless, a threat that we can defend against and manage if we remain clear-eyed and do not make the mistake of overreaction that the jihadis hope we will. The Obama Administration has employed military force, intelligence operations, law enforcement and diplomacy to implement its counterterrorism policy. I believe these tools have served us well and should continue to be at the heart of our efforts going forward. The signature initiative of the first Obama term – the drone campaign against al Qaeda – has been updated in the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria to include more manned air strikes, special operations efforts and training and equipping of Iraqi, Kurdish and Syrian opposition forces. The approach has achieved real success, though it requires patience — a scarce resource — while the necessary intelligence base is built up for the campaign. The military effort has also successfully targeted a significant number 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. As a way of avoiding the putting large number of forces into a combat role, this approach has been useful and, whatever the costs are in terms of time till success, they are more than offset by the lack of radicalization that ensues from large deployments.

Let me briefly address some other key considerations — there are far too many to address them all -- that I believe will be important to success against terrorism. One important requirement is capacity building, which has grown in importance during President Obama's second term. Multi-billion dollar requests beginning in 2014 were sent to the Hill to support both military and civilian efforts. Congress amply funded the military request in the first round but denied funding to State. In 2016, however, Congress did partially fund State's Counterterrorism Partnership Fund requests for both traditional capacity building efforts focused

on law enforcement and high-end police capabilities. To put it bluntly: the U.S. must have capable partners, especially in the developing world, where states are often too weak to defend themselves fully. It is, moreover, imperative that the resources be made available for civilian-side capacity building that increase capabilities while respecting human rights — a paramount concern if we are to avoid the repressive approaches that drive radicalization. That means strong police, strong courts, legislatures capable of trying and convicting terrorists and prisons capable of incarcerating them. We will not always succeed in these efforts, but we still must broaden them to more countries and deepen our engagement. Such work will repay the investment when the U.S. does not need to deploy forces to deal with more jihadist violence far from our borders.

We must strengthen and, in some cases, revitalize our bilateral partnerships as part of a broader effort to construct an international coalition against ISIS and jihadist extremism and to resolve the underlying conflicts in the broader Middle East. The Administration has had limited success at eliciting help from Sunni coalition partners; the overwhelming majority of partner support has come from Australia and Western European countries, and that still amounts to a third or less of our overall contribution. Although Jordan and Bahrain have made noteworthy contributions, Saudi and Emirati forces have done little, focusing their efforts instead on the fighting in Yemen. Turkish forces have also contributed little. So long as the region is more focused on the sectarian divide, containing and eliminating extremism will be a secondary or tertiary concern. (Russian efforts, it should be noted, have focused chiefly on opponents of the Asad regime — not ISIS.)

That said, President Elect Trump will have his work cut out for him in this area. Some leaders of Muslim nations – especially non-democratic ones – may at first be eager to work with a U.S. president who will not lecture them on human rights or democracy, but their publics are unlikely to understand why they are meeting with someone who has spoken so disparagingly of Islam and opined that there was a "sickness" in Islam." Since we rely on these partners for intelligence that has saved American lives, this is a major concern.

Our partnerships with the Sunni Arabs are not the only ones requiring attention. Although our bilateral intelligence sharing with European partners is generally acceptable, we need them to step up to become more productive collectors at home and abroad, especially as the number of foreign fighters returning from the conflict in Syria continues to increase. (The migration crisis remains outside the scope of this hearing, but a robust US effort to ameliorate that issue may be needed, including through acceptance of more immigrants and active diplomacy to ensure that those requiring resettlement outside the region are equitably distributed.) Although our intelligence and immigration systems have performed well in keeping terrorists out, Europe is at least partially within our security perimeter due to the visa waiver program and deep economic ties. Our cooperation on counterterrorism efforts outside the continent – including on high-priority development work – remains fragmented. The US has a vital interest in European security as well as in Europe's performance as a counterterrorism partner inside and outside the continent. We European leaders – perhaps as an add-on to a NATO summit – to press for greater integration of intelligence and law enforcement operations especially within Europe but also across the Atlantic as well as increased intelligence and military cooperation and targeted development assistance and capacity building in third countries. None of this will be easy during a period when the transatlantic agenda will already

be overloaded with such issues as Russia, trade and the future of NATO topping a list of urgent issues.

We will continue to need a robust effort to block terrorist finance. 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. Vigorous continuation of such efforts against ISIS and other terrorist groups is vital.

We must also deepen our efforts to prevent radicalization and recruitment at home and abroad. A recognition that a more comprehensive approach was needed to defeat ISIS – one that included a focus on addressing the factors driving ISIS recruitment and empowering local communities led the White House to stage an ambitious CVE Summit in early 2015 and to initiate more vigorous programmatic efforts at home and overseas. The infrastructure is there for meeting global needs: The Global Counterterrorism Forum remains an effective institution for propagating best practices in CVE and civilian CT, and the State Department-led the creation of the multilateral Global Community Engagement and Resilience Fund – an innovative public-private fund to channel grants to local NGOs working on CVE.

In my view, we need to accelerate efforts in this area and especially rebalance our work to support programs that empower communities to intervene with at-risk individuals. Overall funding of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) – from both the US and partner countries – remains minuscule, with CVE accounting for less than 10 per cent of State/CT's capacity-building budget. While the global trend has been toward more direct community engagement aimed at addressing local grievances and providing vulnerable young people alternative paths, the Administration has still devoted much of its CVE energy to counter messaging, focusing in particular on the attempt to undermine ISIS online propaganda. In 2016, the Administration folded the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) into the new GEC, ended CSCC-originated messaging and created new communications hubs – the first in Dubai and then another in Malaysia – to be run by Muslim partners. Obviously, we cannot abandon the public communications sphere to the extremists. At the same time, though it is questionable whether messaging linked to "apostate regimes" will be more successful than US-created messaging. Moreover, expert opinion has become increasingly doubtful about the value of such campaigns. While some messengers (ISIS defectors, for example) may be effective, too often, we are spending large sums to reach young people who are cognitively closed to such appeals.

At home, we also need to realign and deepen our efforts to counter extremism. American Muslim communities may be our first, last, and best defense against home grown radicalization and terrorism as they are the most likely to recognize the behavioral patterns of radicalization before it's too late and intervene to help set a young person straight. Unfortunately, the trust between these communities and the government is very uneven. Law enforcement is perceived by some as the enemy. There are few, if any, non-law enforcement alternatives to which to report concerning behavior. And interventions, such as counseling to prevent violence before law enforcement is needed, remain quite limited and entirely ad hoc. The FBI and its state and local partners have achieved some remarkable successes — most recently, the swift apprehension of Ahmad Khan Rahami, in New Jersey in September. Such accomplishments

increase deterrence against would-be terrorists, but if we seek to stop radicalization before the turn to violence has occurred, approaches other than law enforcement are also necessary.

This requires engaging and empowering communities: families, peers, teachers, religious leaders, mental and public health professionals, social workers, and others who are often in the best position to recognize signs of radicalization in young people and work, where appropriate, with law enforcement to intervene before it's too late. This is particularly important given that the perpetrators of each of the recent attacks exhibited behavior that suggested that they were becoming or were already radicalized. That behavior was observed by community members who either lacked the knowledge or training, were in denial, or did not know to whom to turn to other than law enforcement.

Community members need encouragement, guidance, and flexible resources from all levels of government, as well as the private sector to play this preventative role effectively and to develop "off-ramp" programs for those at risk or who have begun to embrace terrorist propaganda but have not committed a crime. In order to broaden and deepen the involvement of communities in this work, these efforts should be anchored in a framework centered on preventing targeted violence rather than the narrower "CVE" law enforcement-centric approach that has not gained traction in or, in some cases, alienated communities. A more effective approach — similar to what is done in the world of public health — would involve detecting and interrupting a behavior before it becomes dangerous and spreads, changing the thinking of those most at risk, and, in time, reshaping the social norms that exacerbate those risks.

Pilot programs in Boston, Chicago Los Angeles, Minneapolis and in Montgomery County, Maryland have been working developing this kind of effort. Framing the work in this way will facilitate efforts to involve mental health and social service professionals, educators, teachers, religious leaders, not to mention federal departments and agencies (e.g., HHS and Education) that have so far been reluctant to get seriously involved in CVE efforts, and will allow for the development of the necessary multi-disciplinary/agency approach both in and outside the Beltway. This, I would submit, is a true "whole of society" approach to addressing the multi-faceted challenge of violent extremism.

Let me close with a final global perspective, which I confess I offer with a sense of futility. The durability of the jihadist movement reflects the profound social, governmental and economic dysfunction of many Muslim nations. Since 9/11, analysts and policymakers – including Secretary Kerry – have spoken of the need for a comprehensive economic and political reform effort along the lines of a Marshall Plan in the MENA region. The nation, I strongly believe, should consider whether it is desirable and feasible to undertake a genuinely global effort to address the root causes of extremism, which would entail significant large scale non-military capacity building, human capital development, local economic opportunity unencumbered by overbearing bureaucratic impediments, and poverty alleviation.

Thus far, the costs of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, the Great Recession and the state of Western budgets have prevented any serious consideration of such an initiative, including at the time of the Arab Spring. A meaningful initiative may remain simply out of reach because prospective partner governments will refuse to reform or require exorbitant subventions to make it worthwhile for them. Prospective Western partners may be unwilling to support a program that

will not pay off for decades. Still, we need to examine the concept of deep engagement with Muslim-majority countries to advance democratic institutions and economic opportunity. The region is dangerously broken, and leaving it in its current condition is a recipe for the development of further extremism. Such an effort would obviously require support from Europe, the Gulf, the Pacific Rim and North America.

Quite clearly, such an approach is unlikely to fit in with a narrowly conceived governing concept of "America First." Nonetheless, in light of the hundreds of billions of dollars we spend every year on counterterrorism, we would be derelict not to think long and hard about the possible benefits such a comprehensive approach might yield.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present this testimony.