

**Written Statement  
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**Senate Committee on Foreign Relations  
“Syria Spillover: The Growing Threat of Terrorism and Sectarianism in the  
Middle East”  
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Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Corker, Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to address the challenges of growing extremism in the Levant.

My statement will discuss the nature of the extremist challenge in the Levant, the important interests at stake for the United States, and how we intend to advance and protect those interests over the coming months.

***The Nature of the Challenge***

Over the past decade, aspirations for a better life have risen among populations across the Middle East. Sixty percent of the people in the region are under 30 years of age, and their ambitions – for economic opportunity, political expression, and basic human rights – ultimately burst onto the streets, from Tunisia, to Egypt, to Libya and Yemen, Bahrain and finally to Syria. Fueled by new technologies that enabled greater connectivity and individual political expression, populations across the region, often for the first time, sought to hold their leaders accountable.

There have been some successes, most notably in Tunisia, where a new pluralistic political system has begun to emerge, anchored by a just-ratified constitution, and in Yemen, where the first phase of an historic level of national consultation over the direction of the country has just been completed. But the broader trend is one of turbulent transformation, often exacerbated by regional rivalries and destabilizing interventions, including Iran’s role in Syria. The initial exhilaration among those pressing for change has given way to the hard realization that lasting social and political transformation requires arduous effort, compromise, and time.

The rapid changes in the region have created vacuums and reopened long-dormant divisions within societies and along class, sectarian, and ethnic fault lines. Sectarian conflicts have re-emerged, and the same technologies that facilitated peaceful popular movements have also been used to deepen societal fissures –

spreading messages of hate and incitement against entire groups based solely on identity or affiliation.

Nowhere have these trends converged more powerfully than in Syria. There, three years ago, an authoritarian regime met peaceful protests with violent suppression and carnage. The fateful decision by the Asad regime to reject a meaningful political dialogue and violently suppress popular aspirations led to open, armed conflict. That conflict exacerbated existing ethnic, sectarian and broader regional political tensions, fueling the extremism that is the topic of this hearing.

Among the many consequences of the Syria conflict, one of the most serious is the rise of extremism in the Levant. The conflict is now attracting foreign fighters from across the region and around the world. Many of these fighters are affiliated with designated terrorist groups, such as the al-Qaida affiliated al-Nusrah Front, and the formerly Iraq-based al-Qaida affiliate now known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Both of these terrorist groups have sought to hijack the same popular aspirations the regime violently repressed.

As my colleague from the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) will discuss in more detail, NCTC now assesses there are nearly 23,000 extremist fighters in Syria, including more than 7,000 foreign fighters from as many as 50 countries. These fighters, mostly Sunni extremists, could represent a long-term threat to U.S. national security interests. Nusrah and ISIL, have exploited largely ungoverned spaces in northern and eastern Syria to carve out territory to train fighters, recruit more of them, and plan attacks. Both groups have recently taken credit for terrorist operations in Lebanon, including one on the Lebanese Armed Forces. ISIL has also established camps in western Iraq and claimed terrorist operations in Iraq.

From the other side, thousands of foreign fighters (mostly Shi'a) have traveled to Syria to defend the Asad regime with active support from Iran and Lebanese Hizballah in recruiting and fighting. We believe the majority of these fighters come from Lebanon and Iraq. They are recruited on the premise of defending holy sites in Syria, but have been observed in battle across Syria. The foreign fighters' presence exacerbates the conflict's sectarian dimension and has led to lethal competition with the indigenous Syrian opposition.

The grinding Syrian conflict is now an incubator of extremism – on both sides of the sectarian divide. Controversial Sunni clerics have called on able-bodied Sunni men to travel to Syria to fight in a foreign war against what they brand a Shi'a regime. Radical Shi'a clerics such as Hasan Nasrallah, the head of the high profile

Shia extremist group Hizballah in Lebanon, have called on able-bodied Shiites to fight those they brand “Takfiris” fighting on the side of the opposition.

It is important to note that the conflict in Syria is not primarily a clash between the Shi’a and Sunni branches of Islam, but rather a clash between a small minority of violent extremists against the vast majority of moderates, whether Sunni or Shi’a, who seek to realize the promise of economic and political modernization. The extremists fueling the flames of conflict are outliers. To put that in perspective, while there may be up to 23,000 fighters among the rebel ranks inside Syria, the total number of opposition fighters is estimated between 75,000 and 110,000.

Despite the sectarian dimension of the Syria conflict, we also believe that it is a mistake to describe it as simply a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. To do so obscures the origins of the Syria conflict, which began as a non-violent movement for political change. And it trivializes the sacrifice of the many Syrian men and women who do not identify with extremists from the Sunni or Shi’a camps, and who have stood up to an oppressive regime for basic political rights. It would be a mistake to dismiss this moderate majority, who stand against violent extremist groups on both sides of the conflict. The United States has no interest in taking sides in a contest between Sunni and Shi’a, whether in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, or anywhere else in the region. Instead, as President Obama has stated:

“What we are trying to do is take sides against extremists of all sorts and in favor of people who are in favor of moderation, tolerance, representative government, and over the long term, stability and prosperity for the people of Syria.”

That statement encapsulates our fundamental objective, not only in Syria – but also throughout the Levant and the broader region.

### ***U.S. Interests at Stake***

There are four immediate risks to U.S. interests from the Syrian conflict and the rise of extremist groups in the Levant.

First, there is the risk of external operations by al-Qa’ida affiliated or inspired groups, such as al Nusrah and ISIL. We know that some of these groups seek long-term safe haven from which to expand their base of operations for attacks throughout the region and potentially the West.

Second, there is the risk to the stability of our partners in the region, including Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. In Lebanon, there are now nearly one million refugees from Syria, roughly 20-percent of the population prior to the Syrian conflict, and sectarian tensions are spilling over the Syria-Lebanon border. Lebanon has experienced car bombs in Beirut and elsewhere and gunfights in the flashpoint city of Tripoli. Shia-populated border towns have been the target of direct attacks by ISIL, Nusrah, and its allies in the Islamic Front, and Sunni towns by the Asad regime. In Jordan, nearly 600,000 Syrian refugees, more than 10 percent of the population, are stressing limited resources. Despite an unprecedented international humanitarian response, both Jordanian and Lebanese governments are struggling to deal with the strain. In Iraq, the two-way flow of extremist fighters – and the rise of ISIL – has increased violent attacks to levels not seen since 2007, with nearly 1,000 Iraqis killed in January 2014 alone.

Third, there is the risk to Israel and Arab partners in the region from the rise of Iranian-backed extremist groups, especially Lebanese Hizballah, as well as the dangers when battle-seasoned Sunni fighters return to their home countries. In the case of Yemen, we see young men from both sides of the sectarian divide going to the fight, with plans to return to Yemen to use those skills. Fighters from the Iranian-backed groups are now gaining battlefield experience through regular rotations to Syria and advanced military training, including at training camps in Iran.

Fourth, there is the risk to the Syrian people, whose suffering constitutes the greatest humanitarian crisis the world has seen in this new century. Approximately 9.3 million people inside Syria are in need of humanitarian assistance, and well over 100,000 have now been killed since the conflict began. As in all conflicts, the suffering of the most vulnerable population elements is the greatest. Polio has returned to eastern Syria, where conflict disrupted vaccination programs. And we are increasingly concerned about a potential “lost generation” of Syrian children now living as refugees or internally displaced persons, many of whom are traumatized and without access to education, medicine or adequate food.

## *U.S. Strategy: Bolster Moderates, Isolate Extremists, Shore up Neighbors*

To mitigate these risks and protect U.S. interests, our strategy must focus both on immediate and long-term initiatives that leverage existing security relationships with key partners. In the long-term, as explained by the President, we face a struggle – not between Sunni and Shi’a, or Iran and Saudi Arabia – but between extremists and moderates. Our policy is to isolate extremists and bolster moderates – a critical mass of the population – both in Syria and in the greater region. Over the long-term, this requires a steady focus on supporting economic and political modernization. In the immediate term, we are focused on mitigating risks stemming from the Syria conflict and the rise of extremism and extremist groups in the Levant, and on shoring up Syria’s neighbors. We will work along four lines of effort, focused on the most acute risks to U.S. national security interests.

**First, we will work to isolate and degrade terrorist networks in Syria.** As my NCTC colleague will address in detail, it is essential that we work with regional and international partners to police and stem the flow of foreign fighters into and out of Syria on both sides of the conflict. For example, we are working with Turkey on border security, and we have robust security cooperation with Jordan. We are encouraged by laws recently enacted by Saudi Arabia, which made it illegal for Saudis to fight in a foreign conflict, a topic that the President will discuss with King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia later this month in Riyadh. We are also pressing regional partners to stop the flow of finances and weapons to terrorist groups, including designated terrorist groups like Nusrah and ISIL. Our partners are concerned about the lure of the battlefield to their young men, and the potential for violent extremism blowback in their own countries. We are encouraging them to look at a range of tools to discourage flows of money and fighters to the battlefield.

In parallel, we are working to further enhance the capacity of the moderate Syrian opposition, both inside and outside Syria. It is important to bear in mind that moderate insurgent groups now face a two front war-- against the Asad regime on one side, and ISIL on the other side. The moderate groups are an ally against ISIL, a point its leaders repeatedly made during the international talks held recently in Montreux and Geneva. The willingness of the moderate insurgents to confront ISIL is an important development. The Asad regime itself, heavily dependent on the “shabiha” militias and the assistance of Hizballah and Iran, is most responsible for introducing terrorists to the Syrian conflict.

The success of our efforts to isolate and defeat violent extremist networks in Syria – their leadership, weapons, and financing – depends on negotiating a transition to a new leadership, without illusion about how long and difficult this process is likely to be. The United States will continue to work closely with the UN, Russia, and the London 11 to support the Geneva process and press the regime to accept the key elements of the June 2012 Geneva communiqué, including a Transitional Governing Body. However imperfect, the Geneva process, when combined with other measures, represents the best chance we have to negotiate an end to this bloody conflict. And we will consider additional diplomatic means by which to bring this about.

**Second, we will work to strengthen the capacity of Syria’s neighbors, particularly Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq.** As we work to isolate and degrade the violent extremist networks in Syria, we must work in parallel to enhance the capacity of Syria’s neighbors to mitigate the spillover effects of the conflict. Over the past six months, I have visited neighboring capitals to help coordinate our efforts. This included a visit in late January to Amman and then Baghdad, where I met with senior officials, including King Abdullah and Prime Minister Maliki, to discuss the Syria situation. Our relationships with these countries are multifaceted, but the key points include:

**In Jordan,** we have heard King Abdullah’s concerns about the risks of extremist spillover from Syria. We are increasing assistance to the Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF) to police its sensitive borders and guard against external threats, and are sharing information about the violent extremist threats emanating from Syria. CENTCOM Commander General Austin has also been consulting closely with his Jordanian counterparts. To support Jordan, we have provided \$300 million per year in military assistance to the JAF and \$360 million per year in economic support to address long-term development. We look forward to continuing this strong relationship in support of Jordan’s economic and security reforms. We are also committed to supporting Jordan as it contends with the staggering costs of hosting nearly 600,000 Syrian refugees. To that end, we have provided cash transfers totaling \$300 million in the last two fiscal years; supported a \$1.25 billion U.S.-backed loan guarantee; and provided more than \$268 million toward the humanitarian needs of Syrian refugees in Jordan. We appreciate Congressional support for these additional needs and will continue to provide assistance to help Jordan address challenges arising from the Syrian crisis. As you know, King Abdullah was in the United States last month to discuss these and other initiatives with President Obama, Secretary Kerry, Secretary Hagel, other Cabinet Members and the Congress. Jordan is a cornerstone of regional stability and King Abdullah,

one of our closest partners in the region, heard a staunch message of U.S. support to help protect Jordan against violent extremist threats and maintain support for the Jordanian economy.

**In Lebanon,** we are supporting the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the Internal Security Forces to deter violent extremist spillover from Syria. Since 2005, the United States has allocated nearly \$1 billion to support the LAF and Internal Security Forces, and we are engaged with the Saudi Arabian government to so that its recent pledge of \$3 billion is used in a manner that complements our mutual goal to build up LAF capabilities. The U.S. commitment to a strong, independent, and sovereign Lebanon is steadfast, particularly as the country faces political challenges and spillover effects from Syria. During my last visit to Beirut, I met with senior political officials and military commanders, including President Sleiman and the LAF Commander, General Kahwagi. The impact from the Syrian conflict was central in all of my conversations, particularly as the LAF had just suffered casualties during an engagement with violent extremists in Sidon, a majority Sunni town south of Beirut. The refugee crisis has affected more than 1,600 communities across Lebanon. Secretary Kerry participated in the March 5 International Support Group for Lebanon ministerial in Paris to demonstrate our ongoing partnership with the Lebanese people, our support for development of the Lebanese Armed Forces, and our intention of working with the new cabinet to help Lebanon address its security and economic challenges. The United States will continue to reinforce the generous humanitarian response from the Lebanese government, including with the \$76 million that we have contributed in humanitarian assistance to support refugees and host communities in Lebanon just this year, part of the \$340 million we have contributed to the humanitarian effort in Lebanon since 2011. Politically, we strongly support efforts to ensure that upcoming elections are conducted in a timely, transparent and fair manner in keeping with Lebanon's constitution. Lebanon's leaders must meet their international obligations; all parties must adhere to the official policy of "dissociation" from the Syrian conflict.

**In Iraq,** we are prioritizing security assistance to combat the rising threat from ISIL, while pressing Iraqi leaders to execute a holistic strategy comprising security, political, and economic elements to isolate extremists over the long-term. During my recent visit to Baghdad, I discussed with leaders from all political blocs the need to pull together to address the ISIL threat. My conversations focused in particular on the situation in Ramadi and Fallujah, where ISIL has attempted to assert control and install local governance structures. The threat from ISIL is real, with materiel and suicide bombers flowing between Iraq and Syria, and executing a

coordinated campaign meant to overthrow the Shia led government, in part by conducting widespread indiscriminate attacks against Sunnis, Shia, and Kurds, and other populations in Iraq. We are encouraged by the response in Ramadi, where the central government is working in coordination with local leaders and tribes to expel violent extremist fighters from populated areas. The central government has approved approximately \$128 million in assistance to meet humanitarian and reconstruction needs as well as support for tribes fighting ISIL. The Government of Iraq has also established a National Crisis Cell to coordinate assistance to Iraqis displaced by the recent sectarian violence in Anbar. We are now working with the Iraqis to help ensure that this money is allocated as rapidly as possible. Thanks to close cooperation from this Committee and the Congress, we also bolstering the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) with equipment needed in the counter-terrorism fight, including Hellfire missiles. These missiles have proven effective at seriously damaging ISIL training camps in western Iraq, and we will continue to work closely with the ISF to ensure that they are employed with precision and on the basis of sound intelligence. The future delivery of six Apache helicopters, thanks again to support from this Committee, will further improve the ISF's ability to target ISIL safe havens in western Iraq. We will work to ensure that Iraq strictly complies with its end-use obligations for these helicopters. We will also work to ensure that Iraq resists negative pressure from Iran, including accepting offers from Iran for security assistance, which would be a clear violation of international sanctions. Finally, we are pressing to ensure that Iraq's national elections, scheduled for April 30, are held on time. Elections and inclusive politics remain essential for isolating violent extremists.

**Third, we are pushing hard against Iranian financing and material support to its proxy groups in Syria and elsewhere.** As we work closely with our Gulf partners to enhance security cooperation, blunt the violent extremist threat, and support sound economic development, we are also continuing our close partnerships to identify and disrupt Iranian support to its proxy groups. We have assisted the governments in the region and around the world in investigating Iranian and Lebanese Hizballah-directed terrorist attacks and plots. Our diplomatic efforts resulted in the Gulf Cooperation Council announcing their intent to blacklist Hizballah, and the EU's designation in 2013 of Hizballah's military wing as a terrorist organization. In parallel, we are continuing aggressive and ongoing enforcement of counter-terrorism sanctions against Iran, including a series of designations last month by the Department of the Treasury. Over the past few years we have also identified the Lebanese Canadian Bank and two Lebanese exchange houses as foreign financial institutions of "primary money laundering



concern,” under Section 311 of the USA PATRIOT Act due to provision of support to Lebanese Hizballah.

We are also working with our Gulf partners to detect and interdict shipments of Iranian weaponry to proxies in the region. We have repeatedly intercepted Iranian shipments of weapons to militants in Yemen, Afghanistan, and Gaza. Earlier this year, Bahraini authorities seized a boat filled with Iranian explosives and arrested a dozen militants meant to receive the smuggled cargo. We are also continuing to press the Government of Iraq to enhance its inspection of flights traveling from Iran to Syria via Iraqi airspace. While the government has taken some action in this regard, it has not been enough – a message I pressed directly with Prime Minister Maliki and other key leaders during my recent visit to Baghdad.

**Fourth, we support global efforts to address the humanitarian crisis in Syria.**

Violent extremist groups thrive in atmospheres of popular grievance, human suffering, and the collapse of state authority. Beyond the humanitarian and moral imperative, there are hard-nosed security dimensions to our global effort to address the human costs of the conflict inside Syria. The Syrian conflict represents this young century’s greatest humanitarian crisis, with the largest refugee outflows in recent history. As we undertake negotiations with Israelis and Palestinians, in which refugee right of return is among the most contentious issues, it is not hard to see the potential for the humanitarian aspect of Syria’s conflict to further disrupt the Middle East region for decades to come. The United States is the largest international donor of humanitarian assistance to the Syrian people. At the recent donor conference in Kuwait, Secretary Kerry pledged an additional \$380 million in humanitarian assistance, bringing our total assistance to date to more than \$1.7 billion. We also continue to press through the Geneva process and the UN Security Council to expand humanitarian access to Syrians. The recent adoption of a UN Security Council resolution demanding safe and unhindered humanitarian access to civilians in Syria was an important step in that effort and we will press for its full implementation.

**Conclusion**

The reasons for the rise of extremism in the Levant are complicated and flow in part from the profound changes that have swept the region in the past three years. The conflict in Syria and the wave of foreign fighters it has attracted from both sides of the sectarian divide have exacerbated extremism and sectarianism in the Levant, and represent an acute risk to U.S. interests.

We are under no illusions that the framework I have articulated will immediately blunt violent extremism in the Levant, but a strategy to isolate extremist groups, bolster opposition moderates, shore up Syria's neighbors and address the humanitarian crisis offers the best chance in the near-term to mitigate these acute risks. We look forward to working closely with the Congress to address these challenges.

Thank you again for allowing me to address this important topic. I look forward to your questions.

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