Hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
"Extremism and Sectarianism in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon"
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Introduction

Thank you Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Corker, and members of the Committee. I appreciate this opportunity to be here today to represent the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) and discuss with you the threat of terrorism and extremism in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon.

Intelligence Community leaders have testified over the past few weeks on the overall counterterrorism picture, noting that we face an enduring threat to U.S. interests overseas— particularly in parts of South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. However, the regional instability in the Levant and increasingly in Iraq certainly stands out as an area of increasing concern.

The current stalemate in Syria is having a ripple effect in Iraq, in Lebanon, and throughout the region; this is of great concern to the United States, and impacts more than just our counterterrorism equities. There are important defense and geopolitical considerations as well. Therefore, I am particularly pleased to be here today with two of NCTC's key partners— Deputy Secretary of State Burns and Assistant Secretary of Defense Chollet.

The Current State of Al-Qa'ida

It is important to consider the current conflict and regional instability in Iraq and the Levant region in the context of the global terrorist movement. In the face of sustained counterterrorism pressure, core al-Qa'ida has adapted by becoming more decentralized and is shifting away from large-scale, mass casualty plots like the attacks of September 11th. Al-Qa'ida has modified its tactics, looking to conduct simpler attacks that do not require the same degree of resources, training, and command and control.

Instability in the Middle East and North Africa has accelerated this decentralization of the al-Qa'ida movement, which is increasingly influenced by local and regional factors and conditions. This diffusion has also led to the emergence of new power centers and an increase in threats by networks of like-minded violent extremists with allegiances to multiple groups.

Ultimately, this less centralized network poses a more diverse and geographically dispersed threat and is likely to result in increased low-level attacks against U.S. and European interests overseas. Put simply, we are facing a wider array of threats in a greater variety of locations across the Middle East and around the world. In comparison to the al-Qaʻida plots that emanated from the tribal areas of Pakistan a few years ago, these smaller, less sophisticated plots are often more difficult to detect and disrupt, putting even greater pressure on us to work closely with partners around the world.

Last year, counterterrorism operations and the loss of key al-Qaʻida leaders and members further degraded al-Qaʻida core's ability to lead the global terrorist movement and to plan sophisticated attacks in the West. While we continue to assess that al-Qaʻida senior leaders remain the recognized leader of the global terrorist movement, their leadership and authority have not gone unchallenged, as the rift between core al-Qaʻida and the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) makes abundantly clear. We are still assessing the full impact of the recent statement from Ayman al-Zawahiri publicly disassociating al-Qaʻida from ISIL.

Returning now to current terrorist threats in Iraq and the across the Levant, these emanate from a diverse array of actors, ranging from formal groups—such as al-Qaʻida and its affiliates, Lebanese Hizballah, and the ISIL—to a large pool of individuals – many of them from western countries including the U.S. - only loosely affiliated or attached to groups we are tracking.

This morning I will break down the terrorist threat from this region as we see it in the Intelligence Community. I'll start with Syria, then move to Lebanon and Iraq, and finally close with some of the activities we're engaged in to identify Syrian foreign fighters.

Syria

Syria has become the preeminent location for independent or al-Qaʻida-aligned groups to recruit, train, and equip a growing number of extremists, some of whom we assess may seek to conduct external attacks. Hostilities between Sunni and Shia are also intensifying in Syria and spilling into neighboring countries--particularly Lebanon—which is increasing the likelihood of a protracted conflict in Syria as both seek military advantage.

Both the Syrian regime and the opposition believe that they can achieve a military victory in the ongoing conflict. President Asad remains unwilling to negotiate himself out of power—currently an untenable outcome for the opposition forces—and he almost certainly intends to remain the ruler of Syria and to win a new seven-year term in presidential elections that might occur mid-year.

To that end, Iran and Hizballah are committed to defending the Asad regime, including sending billions of dollars in military and economic aid, training pro-regime and Iraqi Shia

militants, and deploying their own personnel into the country. Iran and Hizballah view the Asad regime as a key partner in an "axis of resistance" against Israel and are prepared to take major risks to preserve the regime as well as their critical transshipment routes.

In terms of the opposition, the fight against the Asad Regime includes up to 110,000 insurgents, who are organized into numerous groups, including more than 7,000 foreign fighters from 50 countries. European governments estimate that more than 1,000 Westerners have traveled to join the fight against the Asad regime. Dozens of Americans from a variety of backgrounds and locations in the United States have traveled or attempted to travel to Syria but to date we have not identified an organized recruitment effort targeting Americans. The U.S. government continues to work closely with our foreign partners to resolve the identities of potential extremists and identify potential threats emanating from Syria.

Al-Qa'ida amir Ayman al-Zawahiri and other prominent Salafist leaders continue to issue statements declaring Syria the most critical front for ideologically driven terrorism today and calling for additional fighters to support the cause. Ousting Asad in Syria has become a top al-Qa'ida priority, and some of the most militarily-effective anti-regime forces are also those most closely aligned with al-Qa'ida's violent extremist ideology.

At present, several extremist groups, including the al-Qa'ida-linked al-Nusrah Front and ISIL are in Syria fighting against the Asad regime. ISIL founded al-Nusrah Front in late 2011 to act as its operational arm in Syria, although the two groups split following a public dispute in April 2013. Al-Nusrah Front has mounted suicide, explosive, and firearms attacks against regime and security targets across the country; it has also sought to provide limited public services and governance to the local population in areas under its control.

Al-Nusrah Front's leader, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, in April 2013 pledged allegiance to al-Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, publicly affirming the group's ties to core al-Qa'ida, and al-Zawahiri named the group al-Qaida's recognized affiliate later last year. Many moderate opposition groups fight alongside al-Nusrah Front and other Sunni extremists in Syria and depend on extremists for resources, including weapons and training.

Syria has already become a significant location for extremist groups to recruit, train, and equip a growing number of fighters. The combination of ungoverned areas as new safe havens, the presence inside Syria of experienced al-Qa'ida terrorists and other seasoned extremists, and the influx of Westerners and other foreign fighters creates a fertile environment for external attack planning. Thousands of fighters from around the world—including the United States— have traveled to Syria to support oppositionists fighting against the Asad regime and some have connected with extremist groups, including al-Nusrah Front. This raises concerns that radicalized individuals with extremist contacts and battlefield experience could either return to their home countries to commit violence at their own initiative, or participate in an al-Qa'ida directed plot aimed at Western targets outside Syria.

Lebanon

We expect that one of the continuing effects of the Syrian conflict will be the continued erosion of Lebanese stability this year. The primary drivers of instability in Lebanon are economic, social, and sectarian tensions fueled by the Syrian conflict and Hizballah's willingness to use violence to protect its own and Iranian interests in Syria. The influx of nearly one million refugees from Syria into Lebanon – roughly 20 percent of Lebanon's population prior to the Syrian war – is also straining the country's fragile economy and overburdening already strained public services, particularly in the north and the Beqaa, areas hosting the majority of the refugees.

In May 2013, Hizballah publicly admitted that it is fighting for the Syrian regime and its chief, Hasan Nasrallah, has framed the war as an act of self-defense against Western-backed Sunni extremists, whom he claimed would target all Lebanese if the Asad regime fell. Hizballah is sending capable fighters for pro-regime operations and support for a pro-regime militia. Additionally, Iran and Hizballah are leveraging allied Iraqi Shi'a militant and terrorist groups to participate in counter-opposition operations. This active support to the Asad regime is driving increased Sunni extremist attacks and sectarian unrest in Lebanon.

Following the group's public confirmation that it was fighting in Syria and had played a pivotal role in pro-regime operations in al-Qusayr, Sunni extremist and terrorist elements began a violent campaign of attacks against Hizballah strongholds in Lebanon. There has been a sharp rise in Sunni extremism in Lebanon over the past two years, particularly in the north. Given the character and structure of these many diverse extremist groups there is increasing concern about their threat to Lebanon's stability. In addition there are regular reports of the movement of fighters and trafficking of arms and explosive materials across the Lebanese border with Syria.

- May 2013 – rocket attacks against Hizballah suburbs of Beirut;
- June 2013 – Supporters of Salafi leader Ahmad al-Assir attack a LAF checkpoint near Sidon, killing three soldiers; LAF responds by conducting operations against up to 300 al-Assir supporters;
- July-August 2013 – Sunni extremist groups, the 313 Brigade and the Aisha Mother of Believers Brigade, each conduct a VBIED attack in Hizballah-controlled neighborhoods in Beirut (20 dead, over 250 wounded);
- October 2013 – LAF seizes a VBIED with 250 kg of explosives and a suicide belt; two soldiers and two armed men killed in ensuing gunfire exchange;
- November 2013 - Sunni extremists are tied to two near-simultaneous suicide bombings against the Iranian Embassy in Beirut, probably motivated by revenge for Iran's support of Hizballah and the Asad regime (25 dead, over 150 wounded);
- January/February 2014 – Sunni extremists conduct several VBIED and suicide attacks against Hizballah and Shia interests in Beirut and Hermel (41 dead, over 280 wounded).

Hizballah also uses violence to intimidate and kill political rivals, putting Lebanon's stability at further risk and undermining the country's rule of law. The group was most likely responsible for the December 2013 assassination of senior Lebanese official Muhammad Chatah—a longtime critic of the group and former Ambassador to the U.S., who was the diplomatic advisor to former Prime Minister Saad Hariri [killed in a Vehicle Born Improvised Explosive Device].

In short, the various factors contributing to instability in Lebanon are only exacerbated by the protracted conflict in Syria, particularly as tensions grow between Shia and Sunni groups operating inside Lebanon.

Iraq

In Iraq, we have witnessed over the last three years a disturbing resurgence by ISIL. The group has a core cadre of veteran leaders, and access to a steady flow of both weapons and fighters from Syria. ISIL is also able to draw from a significant pool of terrorist fighters previously imprisoned by the Iraqi government.   The Syrian conflict has facilitated a greater two-way sharing of Sunni extremists and resources between Syria and Iraq that has contributed to ISIL's increased pace of high-profile attacks.

In 2012, ISIL launched a campaign to free detained members that led to the release of hundreds of prisoners to bolster their ranks. Last year, ISIL's suicide and car bomb attacks returned to their peak levels from 2007-2008. At the end of 2013, the group was averaging a suicide attack each day. The increasingly permissive security environment has allowed ISIL to challenge Iraqi security forces, most recently and notably in Fallujah and Ramadi.

On January 1st of this year, convoys totaling approximately 70-100 trucks with mounted heavy weapons and anti-aircraft guns entered the central cities of Fallujah and Ramadi. They quickly secured vital transportation nodes and destroyed most police stations. The Iraqi army units in the vicinity engaged some armed vehicles but chose to not get drawn into an urban fight. A combination of military, political, and tribal efforts in Ramadi have begun to show results, with the city becoming increasingly secure. The situation in Fallujah, however, is far more disconcerting.

In Fallujah, hundreds of ISIL fighters have joined ranks with former insurgent groups to consolidate control of the inner city and contest areas in neighboring towns. The Iraqi army is facing significant resistance, including well-trained snipers armed with 50-caliber rifles. Last month approximately a dozen Iraqi soldiers were captured near Fallujah. The next day they were executed. At the moment it remains a tense standoff as some tribes are ready and preparing to fight against ISIL, others are preparing to fight with ISIL, and still others on the fence, waiting to see which side is likely to prevail in the end.

ISIL's strength again poses the credible threat to U.S. interests in the region that it had at its peak in 2006. It has pledged its resources to support establishing hardline Islamic governance. And although ISIL is primarily focused on its activities in Iraq and Syria, it still perceives the United States as an enemy.

Early this year, ISIL publicly claimed its first attack in Lebanon and promised more, demonstrating its aspirations go beyond Syria and Iraq. Also in January, ISIL's leader [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi] publicly called for operatives in Iraq to surge attacks in Shia areas the group wants to control to inflame to sectarian violence. In the same speech, he threatened "direct confrontation" with the United States. In sum, our concerns with the threat posed by ISIL to our interests in the region are currently growing, not diminishing. In the period ahead, we will be watching closely to see if the Iraqi government's counterterrorism efforts will gain greater traction against the extremist threat.

Addressing the Specific Threat from Syrian Foreign Fighters

At NCTC, in addition to analyzing and assessing threat information, we play an important role in supporting the effort to watchlist known or suspected terrorists. On behalf of the Intelligence Community, NCTC hosts and maintains the central and shared knowledge bank on known and suspected international terrorists and international terror groups, as well as their goals, strategies, capabilities, and networks of contacts and support. This database of terrorism information, known as the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment (TIDE) supports the border and aviation screening efforts of our partners at the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security. In light of the large foreign fighter component to the Syria crisis that I highlighted earlier, this effort to gather every bit of available information about terrorist identities is particularly important.

For some time we have been engaged in a focused effort—working closely with the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Bureau of Investigation and our other Intelligence Community partners —to track the travel of any individuals that we've identified as having traveled to Syria to participate in extremist activity. When we obtain such information, we ensure that the individuals in question are added to the TIDE database and that their identifying information is exported to our partners to support their various watchlisting activities. We also work with a wide array of foreign partners to try and learn more about how extremists are in fact traveling to Syria, what routes they are using, what facilitation networks are supporting them, and what happens to those extremists both inside Syria and after they leave the battlefield to return to their place of origin. As the conflict in Syria continues, issues associated with Syrian foreign fighters and their travel patterns will be a continued area of the highest priority and emphasis for NCTC and the Intelligence Community.

Closing

Members of the Committee, the deteriorating situation in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq is of great concern to the United States and its allies. The potential for further escalation of sectarian violence and the resulting second and third order effects is of tremendous concern to the intelligence community.

Let me assure you that we are also focused intensively on the tactical threat environment in this volatile region and our responsibility to identify and disrupt threats to our personnel serving in these crisis zones. We ask much of our military members, our intelligence service professionals, and our diplomats to operate in such a dangerously unpredictable environment, but I think all of us recognize that it is in our national security interests to operate in these areas.

The National Counterterrorism Center will continue to support our whole-of-government effort in the region by identifying and analyzing threat information and sharing that information with our partners across the government. In addition, we will continue to focus on identifying individuals who might seek to return from these overseas battlefields and do us harm so that our law enforcement and intelligence officials can engage in the appropriate disruption efforts. And throughout we will continue to keep the Congress fully and currently informed of our activities, as required by the law.

On behalf of the men and women of the National Counterterrorism Center, I want to thank you for inviting me to testify, and I look forward to answering any of your questions.

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