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The Syrian Refugee Crisis and U.S. National Security

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RAND Office of External Affairs

CT-444

November 2015

Testimony presented before the House Judiciary Committee, Subcommittee on Immigration and Border Security on November 19, 2015

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*The Syrian Refugee Crisis and U.S. National Security*²

Before the Committee on Judiciary
Subcommittee on Immigration and Border Security
United States House of Representatives

November 19, 2015

Chairman Gowdy, Ranking Member Lofgren, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Immigration and Border Security, thank you for inviting me to testify at this important hearing, “The Syrian Refugee Crisis and Its Impact on the Security of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.” The tragic terrorist attacks in Paris and the links with Syria make the subject of this hearing particularly important. I have divided my comments into three sections. The first provides an overview of the foreign fighter problem from Syria, the second focuses on the terrorism threat to the United States, and the third examines the implications for Syrian refugees and the U.S. homeland.

I. The Extremist Threat from Syria

In Syria, the United States is providing limited support to some Syrian rebels against Da’ish—also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), or simply Islamic State (IS).³ However, U.S.-led airstrikes and other assistance have halted the Da’ish advance, helped Kurdish forces win back some territory, and supported Iraqi army operations against Da’ish. But the group remains strong and is certainly not yet on the ropes. Over the next several months, Da’ish is likely to remain highly capable because of its access to resources and its ability to replace killed and captured leaders. In addition, the al Qa’ida–affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra and its numerous partners also retain substantial control of territory in northwestern Syrian areas such as Idlib. In fact, Jabhat al-Nusra may be more capable now—with more fighters, funds, and territory—than at any time since its creation in 2011.

¹ The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author’s alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of RAND or any of the sponsors of its research. This product is part of the RAND Corporation testimony series. RAND testimonies record testimony presented by RAND associates to federal, state, or local legislative committees; government-appointed commissions and panels; and private review and oversight bodies. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

² This testimony is available for free download at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT444.html>.

³ Da’ish is an acronym from the Arabic name of the group, al-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fil ‘Iraq wal-Sham.

In neighboring Iraq, the United States is engaged in a counterinsurgency campaign against Da'ish and its allies. After nearly ten months of bombing and U.S. military, intelligence, and diplomatic support to the Iraqi government and local actors, Da'ish has lost ground in some areas—including most recently around Sinjar. But Da'ish still retains substantial territory in the predominantly Sunni provinces of Anbar, Salaheddine, and Nineveh. In addition, Da'ish remains well-funded, allowing it to continue operations. Its funding comes from such activities as smuggling oil, selling stolen goods, kidnapping and extortion, seizing bank accounts, and smuggling antiquities.⁴

Of particular concern for the United States is the growing number of extremists—both Sunni and Shi'a—that have traveled to and from Syria (and Iraq) to fight. The Syrian-Iraqi battlefield likely has the largest concentration of foreign extremists of any jihadist battlefield in the modern era. Estimates of the scale of this problem vary, but there have been over 20,000 foreign fighters who have traveled to Syria to fight. Approximately 3,400 fighters, or 17 percent, appear to be coming from the West. Roughly 200 Americans have traveled—or attempted to travel—to Syria to join the fight against the Assad regime.⁵ It is difficult to predict whether most of the foreign fighters will remain in Syria, Iraq, and other countries over the long run to fight or die on the battlefield; move to future war zones; or return to the United States and other Western countries as we have seen in France. Even if some return, it is uncertain whether they will become involved in terrorist plots, focus on recruiting and fundraising, or become disillusioned with terrorism. Still, foreign fighters have historically been agents of instability. Volunteering for war is often the principal stepping stone for individual involvement in more extreme forms of militancy—including in the United States.

Indeed, there have been a growing number of attacks and plots across the West that had operational ties to, or were inspired by, Da'ish in Syria and Iraq. These include attacks in Paris, France, in November 2015; Garland, Texas, in May 2015; Copenhagen, Denmark, in February 2015; Paris, France, in January 2015; Sydney, Australia, in December 2014; Ottawa, Canada, in October 2014; and Brussels, Belgium, in May 2014. Da'ish has been linked directly or indirectly to plots in such countries as France, Australia, Belgium, Libya, Tunisia, and the United States.⁶

⁴ See, for example, Patrick B. Johnston, *Countering ISIL's Financing: Testimony Presented Before the House Financial Services Committee on November 13, 2014*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, CT-419, 2014. On antiquities, see Financial Action Task Force, *Financing of the Terrorist Organization Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)*, Paris: Financial Action Task Force, February 2015.

⁵ See Nicholas J. Rasmussen, *Current Terrorist Threat to the United States: Hearing before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*, February 12, 2015. NCTC has updated these numbers since February 2015.

⁶ These attacks have generally not involved returned foreign fighters, but rather individuals inspired directly or indirectly by Da'ish.

There is also significant concern among America's European allies about the threat from Syria and Iraq, most recently highlighted by the Paris attacks. For instance, more than 750 British extremists have traveled to Syria.⁷ Many have joined Da'ish, which was involved in at least six mass casualty plots in the UK over the past year.⁸ "We know that terrorists based in Syria harbor the same ambitions towards the UK—trying to direct attacks against our country, and exhorting extremists here to act independently," said MI5 director-general Andrew Parker in a speech earlier this year.⁹ Similar to the United States, the British face a complex threat, with more extremists than MI5 and the Metropolitan Police Service's Counter Terrorism Command, or SO15, can cover at any one time. Despite these challenges, MI5 and the police remain aggressive. In England and Wales, there has been a 35-percent increase in terrorist-related arrests since 2011. And more than 140 individuals have been convicted for terrorism-related offenses since 2010.¹⁰

The British are not alone. Counterterrorism agencies across Europe and North America are under tremendous pressure to prevent terrorist attacks. French authorities report that nearly 1,400 French citizens have gone to Syria—or tried to go.¹¹ In response to the November 2015 Paris attacks, French fighter jets bombed a series of Da'ish targets in Raqqa, Syria, including a command center, a recruitment center, an ammunition storage base and a training camp. The Paris attacks were planned in Syria, organized in Belgium, and perpetrated on French soil with French complicity.

II. The Terrorist Threat to the U.S. Homeland

The United States faces a three-dimensional threat: at home, overseas, and on-line. In understanding the threat from Syria and Iraq, it is important to understand the broader context. Not all terrorist groups present a direct threat to the U.S. homeland. As Table 1 highlights, terrorist groups can be divided into three categories: those that pose a high threat because they are involved in plotting or instigating attacks against the U.S. homeland; those that pose a medium threat because they are involved in plotting attacks against U.S. structures, such as

⁷ The data are from the UK's Security Service, or MI5. See Andrew Parker, Director General of the Security Service (MI5), "Lord Major's Defense and Security Lecture: a Modern MI5," October 28, 2015.

⁸ "ISIS Planning 'Mass Casualty' Terror Attacks in UK, Head of MI5 Warns," Independent (UK), October 30, 2015.

⁹ Andrew Parker, Director General of the Security Service (MI5), "Terrorism, Technology and Accountability," Address to the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) at Thames House, January 8, 2015.

¹⁰ Parker, "Terrorism, Technology and Accountability."

¹¹ Brian Michael Jenkins and Jean-Francois Clair, "Predicting the 'Dangerousness' of Potential Terrorists," *The Hill*, March 26, 2015; Jenkins and Clair, "Different Countries, Different Ways of Countering Terrorism," *The Hill*, February 27, 2015.

embassies and U.S. citizens overseas (though not against the U.S. homeland); and those that pose a low threat because they are focused on targeting local regimes or other countries.¹² Two terrorist groups operating in Syria—Da’ish and the core al-Qa’ida-linked Khorasan Group that operate with Jabhat al-Nusrah—present high threats (Table 1).

Table 1: Examples of Terrorists That Threaten the United States

| | High Threat | Medium Threat | Low Threat |
|------------------------|---|---|--|
| Characteristics | Plotting or instigating attacks against the U.S. homeland and U.S. targets overseas (e.g., U.S. embassies and citizens) | Plotting attacks against U.S. targets overseas (e.g., U.S. embassies and U.S. citizens) | Limited or no active plotting against U.S. homeland or U.S. targets overseas |
| Examples | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Al Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula • Core al Qa’ida (including the Khorasan Group) • Da’ish • Some inspired individuals and networks | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Al Shabaab • Ansar al-Sharia Libya groups • Al Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb • Boko Haram • Haqqani Network | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • East Turkestan Islamic Movement • Suqor al-Sham |

First, some groups pose a high threat because they possess the intentions and capabilities (resources, overseas personnel, and expertise) to plot or instigate attacks against the U.S. homeland and U.S. targets overseas. Since its expansion in Iraq and Syria, Da’ish has become a growing threat to the United States. The most likely Da’ish threat today comes from small cells of operatives or inspired individuals that target civilian targets in the U.S. homeland. Core al Qa’ida, based in Pakistan, also presents a threat to the U.S. homeland. But their leaders have had difficulty recruiting—or even inspiring—competent operatives in the West. That’s why Ayman al-Zawahiri sent a small group of operatives, referred to as the Khorasan Group, to Syria to plot attacks in Europe and the United States. Another is al Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula, which provided training to two of the operatives involved in the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, Said and Cherif Kouachi. Several Yemen-based operatives continue to plot attacks against the United States. In addition, a small number of inspired individuals, such as the Tsarnaev brothers, who perpetrated the April 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, pose a threat.

Terrorists have had difficulty striking the U.S. homeland because of robust counterterrorism steps by the Department of Homeland Security, Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Intelligence Community, and other federal and local agencies. Still, groups that pose a high threat require

¹² Seth G. Jones, *A Persistent Threat: The Evolution of Al Qa’ida and Other Salafi Jihadists*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-637-OSD, 2014.

close intelligence scrutiny, including the travel patterns of their operatives, finances, communications, networks, and other activities.

Second, several extremist groups pose a medium-level threat. They may possess the intentions and capabilities to plot attacks against U.S. targets or U.S. citizens overseas. But they lack the intention, capabilities (resources, overseas personnel, and expertise), or both to plot or instigate attacks against the U.S. homeland. Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia, for instance, has planned attacks against U.S. diplomats and infrastructure in Tunis, including the U.S. Embassy. Several groups with a presence in Libya—such as the various Ansar al-Sharia Libya branches and al Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb—also pose a threat to U.S. embassies and citizens in North Africa; so does al Shabaab in Somalia. Its objectives are largely parochial: to establish an extreme Islamist emirate in Somalia and the broader region. Al Shabaab possesses a competent external operations capability to strike targets in East Africa. The September 2013 Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi, Kenya, was well-planned and well-executed, and involved sophisticated intelligence collection, surveillance, and reconnaissance of the target. Groups that pose a medium threat require close scrutiny in the regions where they operate, as well as their links with high threat groups.

Third, some extremist groups present a low-level threat to the United States. These groups do not possess the capability or intent to target the United States at home or overseas. They include such organizations as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement and Uighur separatists, which are primarily interested in Chinese targets.

III. Implications for Refugees and the U.S. Homeland

Based on the threat to the United States from groups operating in Syria and the region, it is important to examine potential risks from increased refugee flows from the region. Refugees have historically played—and will continue to play—a critical role in ensuring U.S. economic prosperity and cultural diversity. In addition, the threat to the U.S. homeland from refugees has been relatively low. Almost none of the major terrorist plots since 9/11 have involved refugees. Even in those cases where refugees were arrested on terrorism-related or even criminal charges, years and even decades often transpired between their entry into the United States and their involvement in terrorism. In most instances, a would-be terrorist’s refugee status had little or nothing to do with their radicalization and shift to terrorism. Up to now, most terrorist groups have not used the refugee or asylum system to come to the United States and plot attacks.

But risks associated with refugees from Syria may be higher today for several reasons. Syria and neighboring Iraq have the highest numbers of foreign fighters on any modern jihadist battlefield, and there has already been an exodus of some fighters to the West. Da'ish has also been active in some Syrian refugee camps in the Middle East. There is some evidence that at least one of the Paris terrorists who killed more than 120 people may have come in the current wave of Syrian war refugees. More than 4 million refugees have come to Europe since Syrian government forces and rebels started fighting. Finally, the U.S. intelligence community's understanding of extremists in Syria is not as good as in many other jihadist battlefields, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, because of more limited intelligence collection capabilities.

Individual terrorists and terrorist groups have multiple options to attack the U.S. homeland. First, they can inspire and encourage locals to conduct attacks through magazines like *Dabiq* (published by Da'ish) and *Inspire* (published by al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula). Second, they can infiltrate members into the United States from overseas to conduct attacks or recruit operatives from U.S. communities. Third, they can target aircraft or vessels coming into the United States. In 2010, for example, al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula attempted to target cargo planes using non-metallic explosive devices hidden in printer cartridges. Russian Metrojet Flight 9268 was not a U.S. bound flight, but—assuming forensic analysis attributes it to Da'ish's affiliate in Sinai—it demonstrates Da'ish's desire to strike transportation targets.

Refugees have occasionally been involved in the first two types of terrorist activity in the United States. Perhaps the best-known case involved Waad Ramadan and Alwan Mohanad Shareef Hammadi, who were arrested on federal terrorism charges in 2009 in Bowling Green, Kentucky. They had been granted refugee status, though U.S. government agencies were unaware of their insurgent activities. Upon investigation, their fingerprints were found in a vast store of unprocessed biometric data and the FBI determined both men had been complicit in attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq and were continuing to provide support to Iraqi terrorist groups. The Bowling Green arrests led to numerous changes in how the United States processed refugees and asylum-seekers. The process had been haphazard, partly because there were so many refugees and asylum-seekers—including from Iraq—being processed through the system. But there were also challenges because the data were not well organized across the U.S. government. Overall, there are a small number of cases in which refugees have been arrested on terrorism-related charges in the United States. Examples include the following:

- A Bosnian refugee in St. Louis (arrested in 2015)
- A Somali refugee in Minneapolis (2015)
- An Uzbek refugee in Boise, Idaho (2013)
- Two Chechen refugees in Boston (2013)

- An Uzbek refugee in Aurora, Colorado (2012)
- Two Iraqi refugees in Bowling Green, Kentucky (2011)
- A Somali refugee in Columbus, Ohio (2011)
- A Somali refugee in St. Louis, Missouri (2010)
- A Somali refugee in Portland, Oregon (2010)
- An Afghan refugee in Aurora, Colorado (2009)

There have been other cases in neighboring Canada, perhaps as an attempt to evade U.S. security measures. Ahmed Ressam, the millennium bomber who was convicted in 2001 of planning to bomb Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) on New Year's Eve 1999, had applied to Canada as a refugee. He was denied refugee status, but still managed to remain in Canada before attempting to attack the United States. Raed Jaser, who pled guilty in March 2015 to involvement in a terrorist plot that targeted a train route between Toronto and New York City, had applied for refugee status in Canada as a Palestinian. The Canadian government rejected his family's refugee claims. But since the family was stateless, the government allowed family members to stay in the country under Canada's "deferred removal" program. Finally, Sayfildin Tahir Sharif (also known as Faruq Khalil Muhammad 'Isa), who was arrested in Canada in 2011 on a U.S. warrant, had moved to Canada as a refugee from Iraq.

Because of these concerns, the U.S. government agencies should continue to reassess America's refugee program and make sure it safeguards national security. The U.S. decision in September to accept 10,000 Syrians during the next fiscal year could introduce pressure on the federal government to move more quickly in processing applications.¹³ If new security checks are introduced, it may be necessary to examine how time can be saved at another point in the process, without sacrificing the quality of the reviews.¹⁴ A number of changes were implemented after the Bowling Green arrests. It is worth examining whether there needs to be enhanced screening and data collection for applicants. Some suggested measures include:

- Additional background checks and other screening protocols in place at the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Bureau of Investigation for screening refugee applicants—including Syrian applicants—through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP).

¹³ Teresa Welsh, "Why the U.S. Can't Immediately Resettle Syrian Refugees," *U.S. News & World Report*, September 15, 2015.

¹⁴ According an August 2014 DHS study, a total of 69,909 persons were admitted to the United States as refugees during 2013. Admission ceilings are revised each year. Data is available from 1990-2013. For more details, see http://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/ois_rfa_fr_2013.pdf

- Improved data management of potentially concerning refugees. Some of the mistakes in the past were not due to screening errors, but rather caused by poor data management. Information on terrorist links never made it to the right databases.
- A reaffirmed emphasis on intelligence and information sharing. This includes connectivity between U.S. intelligence, law enforcement (federal, state, and local), and border security agencies, as well as with international partners, to ensure data are up to date and well-integrated.
- Enhanced re-screening procedures for refugees who have entered the United States.
- Better engagement with Visa Waiver Program countries out of concern that refugees from Syria, Iraq, or other high-risk countries could be resettled there and then enter the United States with a lower level of scrutiny. The possibility that one of the Paris attackers entered Greece as a refugee from Syria reinforces the need to better vet refugees and the ease with which travelers can transit Schengen countries.
- Additional authorities to hold data collected in refugee camps.

The United States has a long-standing tradition of offering protection and freedom to refugees who live in fear of persecution, some of whom are left to languish in deplorable conditions of temporary asylum. But an integral part of that mission needs to be ensuring that those refugees considered for entry into the United States, including from such jihadist battlefields as Syria, do not present a risk to the safety and security of the United States.