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Jihadist Sanctuaries in Syria and Iraq

Implications for the United States

Seth G. Jones

RAND Office of External Affairs

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Testimony presented before the House Homeland Security Committee, Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence on July 24, 2014

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Seth G. Jones¹
The RAND Corporation

*Jihadist Sanctuaries in Syria and Iraq:
Implications for the United States²*

Before the Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence
United States House of Representatives

July 24, 2014

Chairman King, Ranking Member Higgins, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify at this hearing, “Jihadist Safe Havens: Efforts to Detect and Deter Terrorist Travel.”

My argument today is straightforward: the United States faces a threat from violent extremists, including Americans and other Westerners, in safe havens in Syria and other locations. Syria today likely has the largest number of Westerners *in any jihadist battlefield in the modern era*, with greater numbers of Western participants than in past battlefields in Afghanistan (including during the 1980s anti-Soviet war), Pakistan, Iraq (including after the 2003 U.S. invasion), Somalia, Yemen, and Libya.³ But it is important not to exaggerate the threat. Westerners appear to be involved in a range of activities, from providing humanitarian aid to fighting with al Qa’ida-affiliated groups like Jabhat al-Nusra. It is unclear how many of these individuals will attempt to return to the United States and become involved in terrorist activity. Some may die in Syria, some may move to other countries (including other jihadist battlefields), some may focus on humanitarian activity, and still others may become disillusioned with extremist activities. In addition, other groups, such as al Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula and core al Qa’ida, likely present a more immediate threat to the U.S. homeland – at least today. Still, the large number of Western violent extremists in sanctuaries like Syria makes it particularly important to adopt policies and practices in the U.S. homeland and overseas to ensure that violent extremists are detected if they return to the West and, more broadly, to reduce the flow of foreign fighters from the West.

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/CT414.html>.

³ Author estimates based on an overview of Salafi-jihadist groups and fighters since 1988. See, for example, Seth G. Jones, *A Persistent Threat: The Evolution of al Qa’ida and Other Salafi Jihadists* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2014).

I have divided my comments into four sections. The first provides an overview of the threat from sanctuaries in Syria and potentially Iraq. The second section provides broader context and analyzes trends in the number of Salafi-jihadist groups, fighters, and attacks. The third examines the impact of this threat on the U.S. homeland. And the fourth section explores measures to detect and interdict the movement of Western violent extremists – including Americans – and prevent them from conducting attacks in the West.

The Threat from Sanctuaries in Syria and Iraq

The United States faces a threat from violent extremists traveling to – and returning from – Syria and other locations. Since 2011, between 100 and 200 Americans have traveled – or attempted to travel – to Syria to assist rebel organizations. There appear to be a wide range of motivations, such as conducting violent jihad, fighting Shi'a, supporting Syrian nationalist groups against the Assad regime, and providing humanitarian assistance. However, the problem is broader than just Americans. Between 1,500 and 2,500 Sunni extremists from Europe arrived in Syria between January 2012 and July 2014. Many have joined jihadist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusrah and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). In turn, between 300 and 400 extremists appear to have left Syria for countries in Europe.⁴ There are also a growing number of other Westerners, including Australians, participating in such jihadist battlefields as Syria. With the increase in ISIS control of territory in Iraq, there may be a growing number of Western violent extremists in Iraq as well.

These developments should cause concern in the United States. European travelers do not need a visa to enter the United States. This is generally not a problem for known violent extremists that make it onto European – and then American – terrorism watch lists. But it *is a problem* if terrorist fighters and supporters train in Syria without being detected and, consequently, without making it onto any watch list. U.S. and European intelligence collection capabilities are not as robust in Syria today as they were in Iraq and Afghanistan, but the number of Western violent extremists appears to be significantly greater.

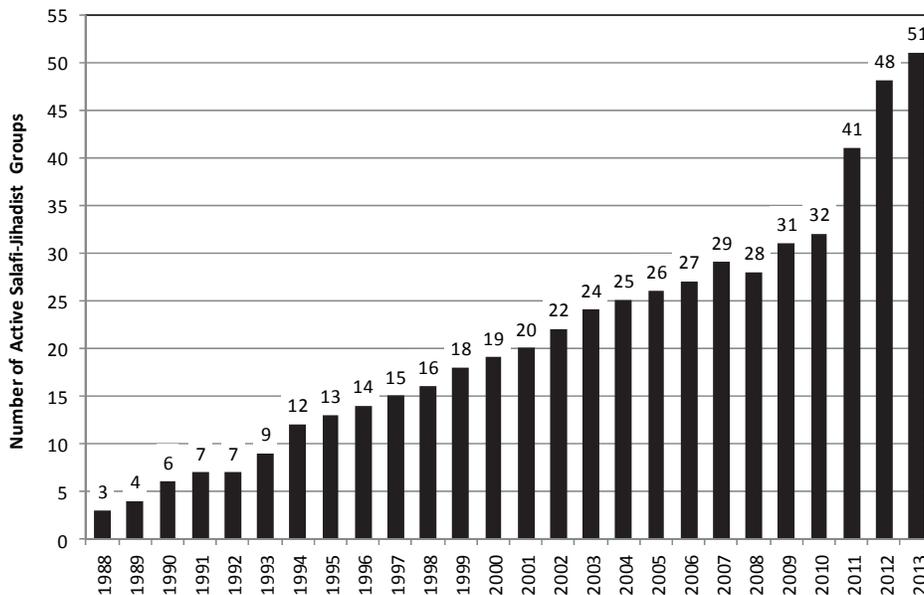
⁴ Author interviews with senior counterterrorism and diplomatic officials from a dozen European countries, July 2014.

Broader Trends

The problem of violent extremism is broader than just Syria and Iraq. Current trends suggest that terrorist groups are metastasizing, particularly in North Africa and the Middle East. As noted in the next section, however, many of these groups are not a high threat to the United States today and are focused on local enemies.

Figure 1 shows the number of active Salafi-jihadist groups, including al Qa'ida, by year since 1988. Salafi-jihadist groups can be distinguished by at least two main characteristics. First, these groups emphasize the importance of returning to a “pure” Islam, that of the Salaf, the pious ancestors. Second, Salafi-jihadist groups believe that violent jihad is fard ‘ayn (a personal religious duty). Al Qa’ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, among others, encourages both Salafism *and* armed jihad.⁵ Each data point on the y-axis in Figure 1 represents the number of active Salafi-jihadist groups that year. As highlighted in the figure, there was a steady increase in the number of groups during the 1990s and 2000s, but a notable jump in the slope of the line after 2010. Most of these new groups were in North Africa and the Levant.⁶

Figure 1: Number of Salafi-Jihadist Groups by Year, 1988-2013⁷



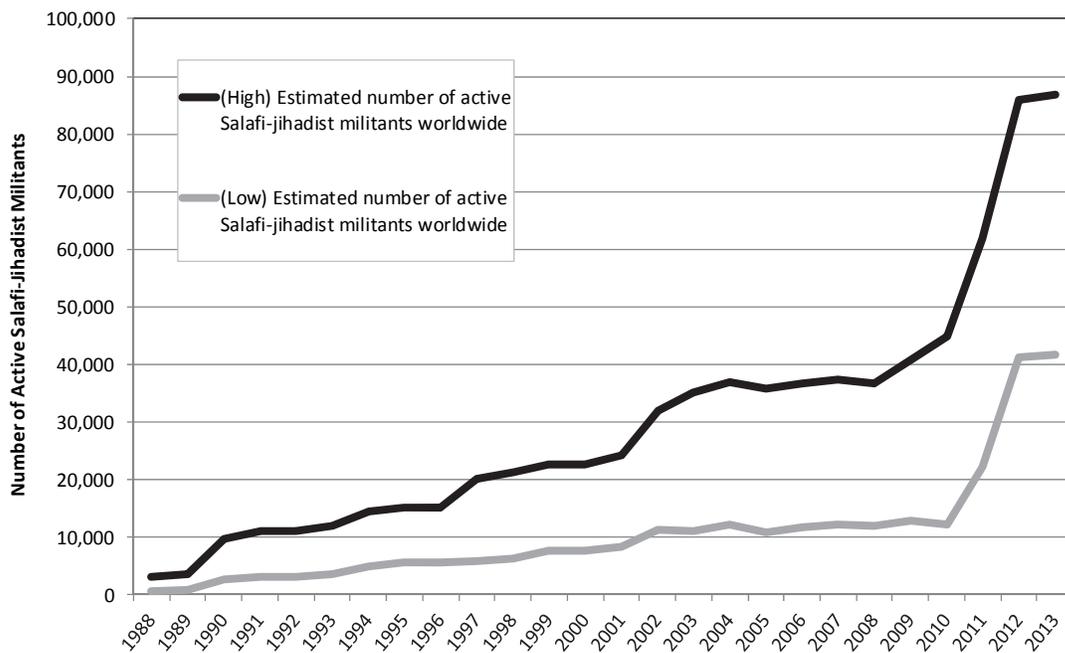
⁵ On the term Salafi-jihadists see, for example, Assaf Moghadam, “Motives for Martyrdom: Al-Qaida, Salafi Jihad, and the Spread of Suicide Attacks,” *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 3, Winter 2008/09, pp. 46–78; Moghadam, “The Salafi-Jihad as a Religious Ideology,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 1, No. 3, February 2008, pp. 14–16.

⁶ As used here, Levant refers to the area that includes Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, and southern Turkey.

⁷ Jones, *A Persistent Threat*, p. 27.

Figure 2 provides a rough estimate of the number of Salafi-jihadist fighters between 1988 and 2013. Calculating the number of Salafi-jihadists is difficult, in part since groups do not provide public estimates of their numbers and they can vary considerably over the course of a group's life. Consequently, Figure 2 includes high and low estimates for the number of Salafi-jihadists by year. The trend is similar to Figure 1. There was a notable increase in the number of fighters after 2010. The biggest jump was in Syria, which witnessed a dramatic rise in the number of fighters.

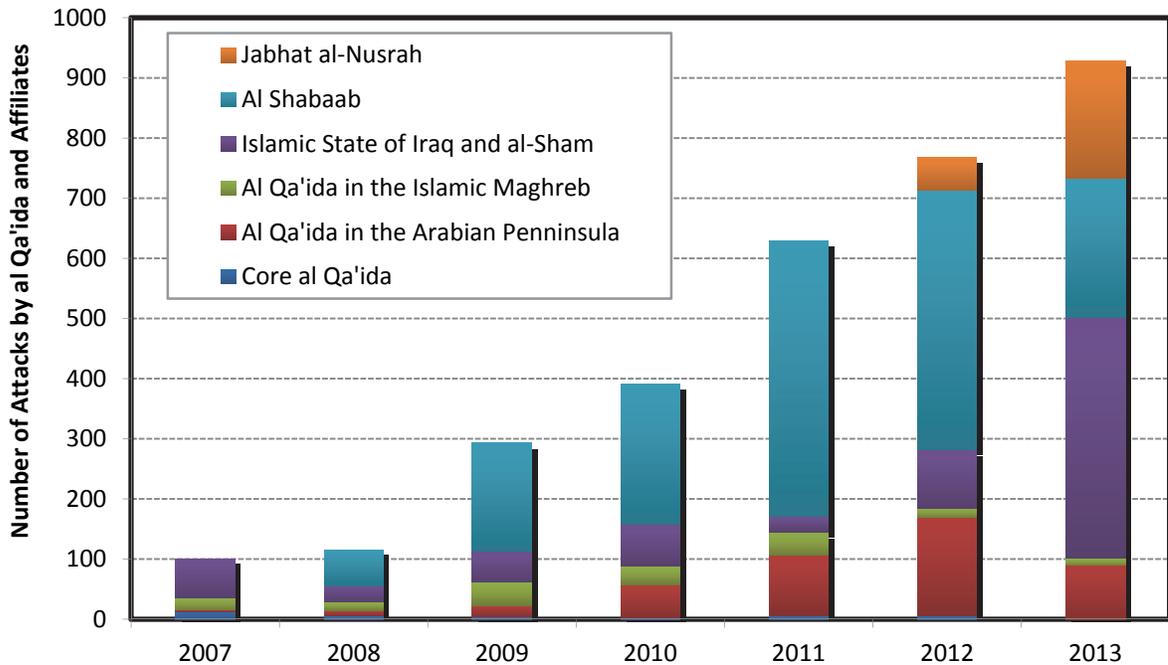
Figure 2: Number of Salafi-Jihadists by Year, 1988-2013⁸



⁸ Jones, *A Persistent Threat*, p. 27.

Figure 3 highlights the number of attacks by core al Qa'ida and affiliates since 2009.⁹ The data indicate a substantial rise in the number of attacks over time. Trends for casualties and fatalities were similar. There was a 167 percent increase in attacks by al Qa'ida-affiliated groups between 2010 and 2013, with most of the violence in 2013 perpetrated by ISIS (44 percent), Jabhat al-Nusrah (24 percent), al Shabaab (22 percent), and al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (9 percent). This marked a change from 2012, when al Shabaab conducted the most attacks (46 percent).

Figure 3: Number of Attacks by Al Qa'ida and Affiliates, 2009-2013¹⁰



To summarize the data, there was a 55 percent increase in the number of Salafi-jihadist groups from 2010 to 2013, primarily in North Africa and the Levant. Libya represents the most active sanctuary for Salafi-jihadist groups in North Africa, and Syria the most significant safe haven for groups in the Levant. In addition, the number of Salafi-jihadists roughly doubled from 2010 to 2013, according to both low and high estimates. The war in Syria was the single most important attraction for Salafi-jihadist fighters.

These trends suggest that the United States needs to remain focused on countering the proliferation of violent extremist groups, including Salafi-jihadists, despite the temptation to shift

⁹ The data on attacks by other Salafi-jihadist groups were much less reliable, so I have not included the number of attacks by Salafi-jihadists outside of al Qa'ida.

¹⁰ Data are based on author estimates and the Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Intelligence Centre Events Database.

attention and resources to other regions and to significantly decrease counterterrorism budgets in an era of fiscal constraint.

Impact on the U.S. Homeland

Not all terrorist groups overseas 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 active plotting against the U.S. homeland; groups that pose a medium threat because they are involved in plotting attacks against U.S. structures like 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.

Table 1: Example of Terrorists that Threaten the United States

| | High Threat | Medium Threat | Low Threat |
|------------------------|--|--|--|
| <i>Characteristics</i> | Active plotting against the U.S. homeland and U.S. targets overseas (e.g. U.S. embassies and citizens) | Active plotting against U.S. targets overseas (e.g. U.S. embassies and citizens) | Limited or no active plotting against U.S. targets overseas |
| <i>Examples</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Al Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula • Core al Qa’ida • Some inspired individuals and networks | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Al Shabaab • Jabhat al-Nusrah • ISIS • Ansar al-Sharia Libya • Hezbollah | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • East Turkestan Islamic Movement • Suqor al-Sham |

First, some groups pose a high threat. Al Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula and possibly core al-Qa’ida likely present the most immediate threat, along with inspired networks and individuals. The growth in social media and the terrorist use of chat rooms, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other sites has facilitated radicalization inside the United States.

Second, there are a number of groups that pose a medium threat. Al Shabaab’s objectives are largely parochial, and it has conducted attacks in Somalia and the region. But al Shabaab possesses a competent external operations capability to strike targets outside of Somalia. The Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi, Kenya was well-planned and well-executed, and involved sophisticated intelligence collection, surveillance, and reconnaissance of the target.¹¹

¹¹ Committee on Homeland Security, *Al Shabaab: Recruitment and Radicalization within the Muslim American Community and the Threat to the Homeland*, Majority Investigative Report (Washington, DC: U.S. House of Representatives, July 27, 2011), p. 2.

ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusrah are primarily interested in establishing Islamic emirates in Iraq, Syria, and the broader region, though their growing networks in Europe and the United States are concerning. Their access to foreign fighters, external network in Europe, and bomb-making expertise suggest that they may already have the capability to plan and support attacks against the West. It is currently unclear whether most of these individuals will remain in Syria or Iraq over the long run, move to other war zones, or return to the West. And 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. They can affect the conflicts they join, as they did in post-2003 Iraq by promoting sectarian violence and indiscriminate tactics. Perhaps more important, foreign fighter mobilizations empower transnational terrorist groups such as al Qa'ida, because volunteering for war is the principal stepping-stone for individual involvement in more extreme forms of militancy. When Muslims in the West radicalize, they usually do not plot attacks in their home country right away, but travel to a war zone first. A majority of al Qa'ida operatives began their militant careers as war volunteers, and most transnational jihadi groups today are by-products of foreign fighter mobilizations.¹²

Third, some groups present a low-level threat to the United States. They do not possess the capability or intent to target the United States at home or overseas. They include such groups as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which has a support base among China's Uighur community and is primarily interested in Chinese targets. Despite this categorization, there is some fluidity between levels because the capabilities and intentions of groups – and their leadership – evolve over time.

¹² Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 3, Winter 2010/11, pp. 53-94.

Detecting and Deterring Travelers

U.S. intelligence, law enforcement, military, and diplomatic officials have spent considerable time and resources on understanding the threat and developing measures to counter the spread of violent extremists from sanctuaries like Syria. But the situation is complex. Violent extremists usually don't advertise that they plan to fight in battlefields like Syria, and many attempt to take circuitous routes to Syria rather than flying directly from the United States to neighboring countries like Turkey. Moving forward, the United States should consider several additional measures to detect and deter violent extremists from coming to – or departing from – the United States.

Working with Europe: The first is to continue assisting European allies, including Turkey, in efforts to identify violent extremists traveling to – and from – jihadist battlefields like Syria. U.S. and European intelligence collection capabilities are not as robust in Syria today as they were in Iraq and Afghanistan, but the number of Western violent extremists is greater.

European states have taken some steps against jihadists traveling to – and from – Syria and Iraq. The United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Norway, and several other countries have arrested some outgoing and returning fighters, facilitators, and recruiters. In addition, several European countries have stripped their welfare benefits, frozen their financial assets, and seized their passports to prevent further travel. The United Kingdom, in particular, has established robust measures. In June 2014, the United Kingdom passed legislation banning ISIS and four other Syria-linked extremist groups, giving it the ability to prosecute individuals associated with or supporting these groups. The United Kingdom is one of only seven European countries that can seize passports of Syria-bound travelers not charged with a separate offense.

The United States should continue working with its allies to improve European counterterrorism and counter-radicalization measures in several areas:

- *Regional intelligence-sharing:* Increased counterterrorism intelligence sharing across Europe would strengthen regional awareness of returnees and Syria-based plotters. But some European states appear to be reluctant to implement comprehensive intelligence-sharing mechanisms across Europe because of data privacy, data protection, and other concerns. Improved European Union approaches to the foreign fighter problem, including strengthening Schengen area border security and expanding the use of the EUROPOL and INTERPOL notice system, would enhance European states' ability to mitigate the threat.¹³

¹³ The Schengen area includes 26 European countries that have abolished passport and any other types of border control at their internal borders, permitting the free movement of individuals.

- *Attendance at terrorist camps:* Criminalizing attendance (not just training) at terrorist camps overseas would likely deter some terrorists from traveling to Syria and Iraq, as well as allow states to prosecute more returnees. It is likely an easier charge to prove than receiving terrorist training. The United Kingdom is the only European Union country with such a law. The United States prohibits attendance at terrorist camps overseas.
- *Preemptive action:* Once individuals arrive in Syria and Iraq, it is already late in the radicalization process for those committed to violent extremism. If there are adequate legal grounds to arrest individuals *before* they travel to Syria or Iraq, however, it would be helpful. Norway, Netherlands, and France are among the few European countries that have preemptively arrested extremists preparing to travel to Syria.

Counterterrorism at Home: The FBI, Department of Homeland Security, and state and local agencies have already increased efforts to counter the flow of violent extremists into – and out of – the United States. But the United States should consider a few additional counterterrorism steps. Following are two examples.

The first is to increase intelligence collection on potential American violent extremists traveling to – and from – Syria and to ensure that U.S. agencies (such as CIA, NSA, FBI, and DHS) are adequately resourced by Congress to collect, analyze, and process signals and human intelligence on such travel. Extremists from the United States or other countries with visa waiver access need to be placed on proper watch lists in the United States, Europe, and other countries. It is troubling, however, that U.S. citizen Moner Mohammad Abu-Salha traveled to Syria to fight with al Qa’ida-affiliated rebels, returned to the United States around May 2013 without U.S. officials realizing that he had trained with an al Qa’ida-linked group, and traveled back to Syria in November 2013 before blowing himself up in a suicide attack in May 2014. In short, U.S. officials apparently did not realize that a U.S. citizen who had received terrorist training in Syria was on American soil for approximately six months before returning to Syria to perpetrate a terrorist attack overseas. Was this a problem in U.S. intelligence collection or analysis overseas, information-sharing with allies, customs and border protection inside the United States, law enforcement gaps inside the United States (including with violent extremists on the Internet and social media), or something else?

Second, the United States should consider adopting – and Congress should consider studying and potentially funding – a modified version of the United Kingdom’s bottom-up law enforcement approach to counterterrorism. In the United Kingdom, there is a counterterrorism coordinating officer in each local police force, ranging in size from one officer to several hundred in the Metropolitan Police Special Branch. This is the point of contact for counterterrorism in local communities.

The FBI and large U.S. police departments – such as Washington, New York, and Los Angeles – are better prepared for counterterrorism than most other departments. But terrorist plots are often hatched outside of these urban centers, and many of the Americans traveling to battlefields like Syria are apparently from rural or suburban areas. Moner Mohammad Abu-Salha lived for a time with his brother in Fort Pierce, Florida, 130 miles north of Miami. Najibullah Zazi constructed his bombs to attack the New York City subway in Aurora, Colorado. Faisal Shahzad rigged his dark blue Nissan Pathfinder with explosives in Connecticut, and then drove it to Times Square in New York City. Many smaller police forces are not involved in counterterrorism, understandably focusing on criminal activity and other local challenges. Their departments often aren't resourced, trained, or prepared to deal with violent extremists in their communities. Yet local law enforcement agencies have a permanent presence in cities and towns, and frequently a better understanding of local communities. As Bruce Hoffman argued in his book *Inside Terrorism*, a critical step in countering terrorist groups is for law enforcement officials to “develop strong confidence-building ties with the communities from which terrorists are most likely to come or hide in ... The most effective and useful intelligence comes from places where terrorists conceal themselves and seek to establish and hide their infrastructure.”¹⁴

One variant of the UK approach in the United States might be to consider appointing a counterterrorism representative in most police departments to act as the intelligence point of contact across the department for counterterrorism. Counterterrorism would not necessarily be the full-time responsibility of this individual or group, who might be more focused on dealing with drugs, homicides, or other local challenges. But this individual would be responsible for coordinating concerns about violent extremists in their community and improving outreach programs to businesses, ethnic communities, schools, and other locations. In addition to serving as the subject matter expert on counterterrorism (including training and contingency planning), this individual would closely cooperate with local Joint Terrorism Task Forces and Fusion Centers. Many police agencies do not have a single point of contact for counterterrorism.

It is important to take proactive steps now to deal with the problem of terrorist sanctuaries. After all, the threat from violent extremists will persist. As a poem entitled “Mujahid's Wish” in the Spring 2013 issue of al Qa'ida's *Inspire* magazine highlighted, the U.S. remains a bitter enemy:

*I wish I am in America. It seems odd, right?
Hijra is not the end of a mujahid's ambition.
Walking with an AK is not the end of the road. I used
To think the same as you, until I met brothers in the
Training camps, brothers who look into the enemies'
Barrels and see Jannah. Surprisingly, many of them*

¹⁴ Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, Second Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 169.

*Wish to live in America. They have one gentle project
To carry out; detonating even one bomb in any crowded
area. They wish to be lone mujahideen like Tamerlan.
Many of the brothers who made Hijrah from the West
Wish they have a return ticket, returning home
Heading for mom's kitchen. Not to serve the kuffar
With delicious and exotic meals, but to terrorize the
American society until they case to fight and assault
Muslims.
Brother residing in the West, grab your chance and
Walk steadfastly towards your goal.
As for me here in Yemen, whenever I move around with
Explosives around my waist, I wish I am in America.¹⁵*

¹⁵ Sheikh Ibrahim Ar-Rubaysh, "Allah Will Restrain the Evil Might of Those Who Disbelieve," *Inspire*, Spring 1434, 2013, No. 11, pp. 36-37.