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The Continuing Lure of Violent Jihad

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RAND Office of External Affairs

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Testimony presented before the House Homeland Security Committee on March 24, 2015

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The Continuing Lure of Violent Jihad²

**Before the Committee on Homeland Security
House of Representatives**

March 24, 2015

Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify on this important issue.

Homeland security today confronts a complex and scary matrix of threats that range from continued efforts to radicalize and recruit homegrown terrorists to sophisticated cyber attacks on our financial systems and critical infrastructure.

My testimony will focus on the terrorist threat emanating from the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Here are the key conclusions:

The civil wars in Syria and Iraq will continue, sharpening the sectarian divide between Sunnis and Shias, threatening the stability of the region, and attracting foreign recruits.

Neither the rebels arrayed against the Assad regime nor the so-called Islamic State forces in Iraq will be able to bring down the governments in Damascus or Baghdad. But neither government will be able to reestablish its authority throughout its territory.

For the foreseeable future, Syria will remain a mosaic of ethnic and sectarian enclaves, some under government control, others under rebel control. In Iraq, Iranian-backed Shia militias augmented by regular Iraqi forces and some Sunni militias may push back the Islamic State, but the central government has relinquished military power to militias under control of Iran, Shia clerics, or tribal sheikhs. The Iraqi army is not the dominant member of this assemblage. The territory controlled by Kurdish forces will remain autonomous, if not formally independent.

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² This testimony is available for free download at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT429.html>.

Winning back territory from the Islamic State will not win the loyalty of Iraq's Sunnis. Excesses by Shia militias will guarantee their continued resistance.

The surrounding countries and the rest of the world will be dealing with the consequences of these conflicts—humanitarian catastrophe, massive refugee populations, and a terrorist factory—for many years to come.

There are now two galaxies of jihadist terrorists in the region that represent a credible threat to the U.S. homeland: al Qaeda and its affiliates, particularly al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen and Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) in Syria, and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

The al Qaeda threat is a continuing one. Although the capability of its core group to launch direct attacks on the United States—the “far enemy”—has diminished, al Qaeda remains committed to attacking us through its affiliates, allies, and homegrown terrorists. In the past, AQAP has recruited volunteers and attempted terrorist attacks on U.S.-bound flights and continues to try to inspire recruits to carry out attacks in the United States. U.S. and British intelligence officials warn that al Qaeda elements embedded in al Nusra are also attempting to recruit foreign fighters to mount new terrorist attacks in the West.

ISIL presents a long-term threat. It has brutally murdered Westerners who fell into its hands. It has urged its supporters in the West to carry out terrorist attacks in their own countries and has applauded them when they have done so. And it continues to attract large numbers of Western recruits.

There is no evidence yet that ISIL is planning to launch its own terrorist attacks in the West. It is currently preoccupied with expanding and defending its territory, which is why it needs a continuing flow of foreign volunteers. However, ISIL could change its strategy as it loses ground to U.S.-supported ground offensives. Facing defeat, it could implement a revenge-driven strategy calculated to provoke direct American intervention and a final showdown.

Retaking the cities and towns now held by ISIL is almost certain to be a long, bloody struggle, which could easily turn into a slaughter that scatters fleeing foreign fighters across the planet. Some will join other jihadist fronts; Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, and the Caucasus are possibilities. Some Westerners will seek refuge—or revenge—at home.

Meanwhile, Western governments, including the United States, are faced with the continued flow of their nationals to Syria and Iraq while trying to intercept those coming back, possibly to carry out individual acts of terrorism. This has already occurred, albeit on a small scale, in Europe.

European authorities are already being overwhelmed by the volume of persons traveling to and from Syria. Thus far, the number of Americans involved appears to be manageable with current resources and laws, although that number is growing. According to official estimates, between 130 and 150 Americans have gone to or attempted to go to Syria in the past three years—already more than the total number that have gone to or tried to go to all of the other jihadist fronts since 9/11, a few more than 100.

Western governments must also deal with the threat of action by frustrated homegrown jihadists who are inspired by al Qaeda's or ISIL's exhortations to action but who are unable to travel to Syria. ISIL's claimed re-creation of the Caliphate has galvanized extremists worldwide. ISIL has also effectively exploited social media to reach a large and impressionable audience.

ISIL's use of deliberately barbaric forms of violence—mass executions, beheadings, crucifixions, burning people alive—resonates with a unique, self-selecting audience of people who are not repelled by such atrocities and may even seek to participate in them. Intensive media coverage of terrorist attacks like those in Brussels, Ottawa, Sydney, Paris, and Copenhagen or of stabbings or driving automobiles into crowds provide further incitement to jihadist fanatics and jihadist loons.

Since the latter part of 2013, the terrorist jihad has been distracted by the schism between the supporters of al Qaeda and the supporters of the Islamic State. Competition between these groups' leaderships for pledges of loyalty and expressions of support continues. Open warfare between the two factions has occurred in Syria. Victory by one over the other seems unlikely. The jihadist movement will always be subject to centrifugal forces, but the current split may or may not persist.

The internal divisions have not prevented the spread of jihadist ideology and establishment of new jihadist footholds, whether these display al Qaeda's black standard or the logo of the Islamic State. Beyond Syria and Iraq lies a complex landscape of shifting loyalties.

In addition to AQAP in Yemen and al Nusra in Syria, al Qaeda counts on its Somali affiliate, al Shabaab, and its North African affiliate, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (or AQIM), which has some presence in Tunisia. Al Murabitun is a splinter group of AQIM operating in the Sahel. In late

2014, al Qaeda established a new front in India, calling it al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, or AQIS.

Ansar al Sharia in Libya and Tunisia (the two are distinct organizations) remain unaffiliated, although some of their members have declared their loyalty to the Islamic State, which has been recruiting from various al Qaeda and independent groups. An estimated 3,000 Tunisians and over 500 Libyans are reportedly fighting in Syria and Iraq.

Boko Haram in Nigeria and Ansar al Maqdis or Ansar Jerusalem, operating in Egypt's Sinai desert, have both pledged loyalty to the Islamic State, as have some disgruntled Taliban leaders in Afghanistan.

The recent attack on Western tourists in Tunisia and explosions at Shia mosques in Yemen, both of which were claimed by the Islamic State, along with the closing of American diplomatic facilities in Saudi Arabia, underscore the danger posed by the spread of jihadist ideology and radicalizing role of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq.

Despite the poaching of recruits and mustering oaths, in fact, the feud between al Qaeda and the Islamic State has little relevance outside of the war zone in Syria. Neither side in the internal quarrel exercises direct control over homegrown jihadists, where the push for action comes as much from the bottom as it does from the top. Some Western jihadists even welcome the split, hoping that it will lead to competition between the two wings of the movement to see which can carry out more spectacular attacks in the West.

Both al Qaeda and ISIL believe that communications are as important as the armed struggle. Both have effectively exploited the Internet, al Qaeda in a more controlled manner and ISIL using social media. We have never really abated the power of the message coming from al Qaeda, and now ISIL, through its actions and communications, has amplified that message to inspire a broader audience. That message will continue to spread and fuel instability in regional conflicts.

There is, nonetheless, good news—in that neither al Qaeda nor ISIL has achieved more than limited success in persuading Americans to join their version of jihad. The terrorist organizations have not been able to build a deep reservoir of support here; there have been few terrorist plots, and thus far there is no exodus of U.S. volunteers going to Syria.

The most likely threat to U.S. homeland security therefore comes from homegrown terrorists carrying out unsophisticated, but lethal, attacks. As we have seen in the terrorist assaults at Fort

Hood, Paris, and Tunis, or numerous non-terrorist shootings in the United States, a pair of gunmen, or even just one, can cause serious casualties. Over the long term, we cannot exclude the possibility of more ambitious plots, although domestic intelligence efforts have been remarkably successful.