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## Western Foreign Fighters in Syria: Implications for U.S. CVE Efforts

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### I. Introduction

Thanks to Matthew Levitt, Richard Abramson, Robert Satloff, and everyone at The Washington Institute for hosting me today. I would also like to thank everyone in attendance, including my colleagues from the federal government. I understand how busy you all are, and I appreciate your making the time to attend.

The reason we are all here today is because we care about the events in Syria. As we all know, there is a humanitarian crisis, which rightly receives much of the attention. According to the latest figures I have seen, there are approximately 9.5 million Syrians who need some type of assistance. Six-and-a-half million are currently displaced and 2.4 million have sought refuge in camps, most of which are in surrounding countries like Jordan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia.

Of course, in addition to grave humanitarian concerns, there are also implications for security and stability. This is true regionally, as Matt Levitt recently stated in his testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. But as Director of National Security James Clapper and NCTC Director Matt Olsen have recently noted, there also are risks to the United States and our allies from individuals traveling to Syria and then returning home. It is in this respect that I would like to focus our discussion today.

I fully appreciate the importance of the broader discussion about the U.S. government's Syria policy and the international community's humanitarian response. But given my area of focus, let me state at the beginning that all questions concerning these issues are best directed to the State Department and USAID.

I would like to focus our discussion on the implications of Western foreign fighters in Syria and U.S. efforts to address terrorist radicalization and recruitment in the homeland.

## **II. Western Foreign Fighters in Syria**

Simply put, we are concerned by the trend of foreign fighters traveling from their home countries to fight in Syria. Of the approximately 110,000 fighters opposing the Assad regime, more than 7,000 foreign fighters have come from abroad. Many of these foreign fighters have traveled to Syria to support secular oppositionists, although some fighters aspire to connect with violent extremist groups such as al-Nusra Front or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Several Westerners have joined al-Nusra Front, including a few who have perished in suicide operations.

So where are these fighters coming from? Estimates I have seen have fighters coming from more than 40 countries, including many in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa, but also from North America, Central Asia, and even Australia. European governments estimate that at least 1,000 Westerners have traveled to join the fight against the Assad regime.

Of the dozens of Americans who have joined the fighting in Syria, a notable example is Arizona native Eric Harroun, who traveled to Syria in January 2013 and was arrested by the FBI in March after claiming to have fought with al-Nusra Front. More recently on November 2, the FBI arrested North Carolina resident Basit Javed Sheikh for allegedly attempting to travel to Syria to join al-Nusra Front.

So why are people choosing to fight in Syria? Individuals travel to Syria for a variety of reasons, including a desire to (1) fight against an authoritarian regime; (2) a humanitarian desire to help suffering Syrians (3) a desire to help establish a caliphate in Greater Syria and the Middle East; (4) a desire to fight against Shiite Muslims who are perceived to be targeting Sunni Muslims in Syria; and finally (5) a desire for adventure.

European Muslims who joined rebel forces in Syria commonly report they were motivated to go because they saw horrific images of the conflict or heard about atrocities committed by the Assad government and wanted to help their fellow Muslims.

Not surprisingly, terrorist recruiters recognize and try to exploit the identity and discrimination issues some European Muslims face by providing a vision of how they can belong to their version of the broader Muslim community, or *umma*. By urging European Muslims to become involved in what they call jihad

on behalf of Muslims suffering in Syria, extremists can link grievances European Muslims might experience in their home countries to a larger narrative of Muslim oppression.

In terms of transportation to the battlefield, there are local networks of extremist recruiters in some European cities that help facilitate travel. Some Europeans are able to find advice and information about going to Syria on the Internet and travel on their own.

For example, a key figure from the group Sharia4Belgium was arrested in Brussels in December 2013 for allegedly radicalizing individuals through his sermons, video posts on the Internet, and dissemination of documentaries calling for violent jihad. And like other conflicts, the Internet and social media are playing a role. For example, al-Nusrah Front regularly sends out tweets and posts images to Facebook.

Westerners who are fighting in Syria also use these tools, as well as Tumblr and Ask.fm, to both share their experiences and encourage others to join them. For example, in some instances they were able to reassure potential recruits that it is okay if they do not speak Arabic.

To date we have not identified an organized recruitment effort targeting Americans to join the fighting in Syria. U.S. persons' travel to Syria generally has been based on peer-to-peer relationships or self-selection.

The challenge for the U.S. government and its allies is that the decision to travel to Syria is not in itself indicative of some who may be radicalized to violence. As I mentioned, individuals may travel for humanitarian reasons. And as national security commentator J. M. Berger has written, for many individuals, becoming a warfighter is a much more appealing moral choice than terrorism. He recently made the argument that "Individuals who would have never volunteered to fly airplanes into civilian buildings can be swayed to take part in the fighting in Syria." Nevertheless, regardless of the motivations individuals hold, if an individual decides to travel to Syria, there is a very real possibility that they will (1) come into contact with terrorist networks, and (2) acquire skills that could facilitate attacks in their home countries, including in the United States or against our interests overseas.

### **III. The Dynamics of Radicalization to Violent Action**

According our analysis, the radicalization of foreign fighters who are going to Syria mirrors the broader radicalization process. Meaning, Western foreign fighters are influenced by the same diverse factors—such as psychological and demographic backgrounds, social networks, and collective grievances—that interact in other instances of radicalization. Some individuals might only adopt a violent extremist ideology

after they come in contact with violent extremist groups in Syria, while others could become disillusioned from their experiences in Syria and disengage from violent extremism when they return.

So how does some become radicalized to violence?

Because we are dealing with an individualized phenomenon that involves social science vice hard science, we will never have absolute certainty about what causes someone to commit to violence. In this respect, our understanding of the dynamics of radicalization to violence continues to evolve. What was once thought of as a linear path is now best represented by three processes, which are in no way linear. These are (1) radicalization, (2) mobilization, and (3) action, which are dynamic, multi-factored, and affected by context.

Let me emphasize: individuals do not progress in a linear fashion from thought to action. Instead they can move toward and away from action depending on their personal state of mind or circumstances. As such, radicalization involves interplay of personal, group, community, sociopolitical, and ideological factors. Importantly, no single factor accounts for why one individual radicalizes while another does not. Of course, in the United States, there is nothing illegal about being "radical." The First Amendment protects radical thought alone. We become concerned when individuals begin actively supporting the use of violence.

Some of the factors that come into play during the mobilization process are the individual's willingness and capacity to act and perceived availability of likely targets. For example, are they acquiring specific skills and identifying military or civilian installations?

Action then occurs if the mobilized individual does not encounter inhibiting factors and then proceeds to carry out an attack. Changes in capacity or opportunity may inhibit action. Meaning, even if an individual is mobilized, it does not follow that they will automatically conduct an attack. Some individuals who are inhibited at this stage may remain mobilized and seek alternate opportunities to act, while others may fall back into a radicalized state of mind but fail to act.

#### **IV. Countering Violent Extremism**

So what is the U.S. government doing to address terrorist radicalization and recruitment? The term "countering violent extremism" refers to the "preventative" aspects of counterterrorism. That is, efforts focused on preventing terrorist groups from recruiting new members or inspiring others to act. Notably, it

is separate from disruptive actions, which focus on stopping acts of terrorism by those who have already subscribed to violence. Rather, CVE is a broad subject matter that ranges from general prevention measures—things that are not done for CVE purposes but which might have CVE effects—to directly addressing and countering the al-Qaeda recruitment narrative.

In August 2011, the White House released the first strategy to prevent violent extremism in the United States. In December 2011, a corresponding strategic implementation plan was issued, which provides a blueprint for the concrete steps the federal government will take to address terrorist radicalization and recruitment. The strategy outlines three goals: (1) enhance engagement with and support to communities targeted by violent extremists; (2) build government expertise for preventing violent extremism; and (3) counter the violent extremist recruitment narrative.

The strategy calls for a whole-of-government approach, which has resulted in an even stronger partnership between NCTC and the Department of Homeland Security, Department of Justice, and FBI. Notably, and where appropriate, we also work with nontraditional partners, which have many programs that may be relevant to preventing violent extremism, like the antibullying campaign.

Since the strategy's adoption, we have made substantial progress on the first two objectives—engagement and building expertise. With respect to engagement, DOJ and DHS have dramatically increased outreach efforts to communities who may be targeted by terrorist recruiters. And in many instances, this engagement is on issues outside the security arena but which they—like all Americans—care about, such as civil rights and immigration. Initially, we do this because this is good governance and the right thing to do. We also hope such engagement efforts build ties and trust between communities and government. Where appropriate, however, we also have direct conversations about the threat of terrorist recruitment and radicalization.

Regarding expertise, we continue to make strides both in our understanding of the radicalization phenomenon as well as the CVE and cultural competency training we offer to federal, state, and local officials. Getting such information out to law enforcement and others is essential to recognizing and addressing the threat, as well as distinguishing cultural and religious norms from truly threatening behavior.

The third objective of the strategy—countering the violent extremist narrative—remains a challenge, which we are tackling head on. In the international sphere, last month The Washington Institute hosted Ambassador Alberto Fernandez, who discussed the U.S. Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Commu-

nications' (CSCC) innovative efforts to confront the changing face of al-Qaeda propaganda, including through direct online engagement.

We are also addressing this challenge in the domestic context, consistent with our authorities. Initially, as I just mentioned, radicalization—having feelings or thoughts that support the use of violence—is protected by the First Amendment. And this is of course a good thing. But we have to acknowledge—and this is not a complaint but rather recognition—that we are limited in our ability to discover when an individual may be moving toward violence. Actions that would trigger law enforcement action come in the mobilization phase, which is when someone begins taking steps to act on their thoughts in order to further a specific political or other goal.

Other First Amendment concerns apply to CVE. For example, the U.S. government can take some steps to undercut the narrative used by terrorists, such as underscoring that American Muslims are part of the fabric of America and vigorously enforcing civil rights protections, including those related to religious freedom. But we cannot and should not make religious arguments, despite the fact that terrorists often justify their actions on theological grounds. Any such actions by the government could violate the prohibition on establishment of a state religion or the placing of limitations on an individual's free exercise of religious thought under the First Amendment.

Beyond the important legal constraints, the U.S. government simply does not have credibility in the theological arena. Even if we could challenge the alleged religious basis of al-Qaeda's ideology, we would not be effective messengers.

As such, when it comes to countering violent extremist narratives domestically, we have come to the conclusion that in many if not most instances, communities must lead and government should play a supporting role. But this should not imply that American Muslims have done anything wrong or have some special responsibility. Like all Americans, American Muslims want to live in peace and security. Rather, we are seeking a more active, community-led role to countering violent extremist narratives because we need their help.

Toward this end, NCTC and DHS have developed a Community Awareness Briefing (CAB), which we use to (1) inform members of the public, specifically parents, about the threat of violent extremist recruitment by letting the terrorists speak for themselves; and (2) more importantly, to catalyze community efforts to counter it. Simply put, if we want individuals to challenge terrorist narratives, we must first share accurate and unfiltered information about the threat. We have delivered the CAB in cities across

the country and thus far the feedback we have received has been generally positive. One consistent reaction stands out: parents and community leaders are surprised how easy it is to access terrorist propaganda on the Internet.

Together with DHS, we have also instituted a CVE leadership forum, which brings together government officials and community leaders with expertise in CVE to (1) address the challenges of violent extremism both domestically and overseas, and (2) exchange information and ideas on the best ways for communities and the U.S. government to counter terrorist radicalization and recruitment.

And just recently, and also in partnership with DHS, we have developed a CVE Exercise, which we have started conducting in key cities across the country. The "CVEX" is a scenario-based tabletop exercise that brings community members and government officials—including law enforcement—together to address the possible radicalization to violence of a young person with the goals of (1) building trust, (2) gaining appreciation of the respective roles of government and communities, and (3) advancing efforts to address terrorist radicalization and recruitment locally.

In this respect, a successful example of a local community-led effort worth noting is the Montgomery County Model, which Washington Institute fellow Hedieh Mirahmadi established with Montgomery County Police Chief Thomas Manger to increase awareness about the risks of homegrown violent extremism and empower the requisite experts to intervene with at-risk individuals.

## **V. Countering Violent Extremism in the Syrian Foreign Fighter Context**

So how does the Syria foreign fighter challenge impact our domestic CVE efforts? In a nutshell, the attraction of participating in the sectarian war in Syria has created a new and significant opportunity for terrorists to recruit and radicalize. In response, we are taking a number of important steps.

In the intelligence context, in addition to analyzing and assessing threat information, NCTC has been working with DHS and the FBI to track any individuals that we have identified as having traveled to Syria to participate in violent extremist activity. And as NCTC Director Olsen recently testified, we are also working with our allies to understand more about how foreign fighters are "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."

In the law enforcement context, DOJ and the FBI are continuing their efforts to investigate and prosecute illegal activity.

And with respect to countering terrorist radicalization and recruitment, we are appropriately expanding our CVE efforts to address the Syrian foreign fighter context. As has been recently reported, the State Department's CSCC has developed a pilot #thinkagainturnaway campaign for English-speaking international audiences, which highlights the brutality and atrocities of terrorist groups in Yemen, Somalia, and Syria, as well as the depredations of the Assad regime. Similarly, in the domestic context, NCTC and DHS are developing a Syria-focused version of our Community Awareness Briefing, which highlights the dangers and reality of traveling to Syria, and exploring ways to include the threat from Syria in the range of our domestic CVE efforts.

## **VI. Conclusion**

As the conflict in Syria continues, issues associated with Syrian foreign fighters will continue to be a high priority for the U.S. government. While the United States is fortunate that we have not had a high number of fighters travel to Syria, as the recent arrests indicate, we are not immune to this phenomenon. And as the Boston attacks demonstrated, it doesn't take large numbers to kill and injure scores of innocents. Successfully addressing this challenge requires a whole-of-government approach, including our traditional intelligence and law enforcement activities. But it also requires directly and appropriately challenging terrorist radicalization and recruitment, and discrediting narratives that might inspire individuals to travel overseas. In this respect, government clearly has a role. But as I have discussed—and specifically in the domestic context—this is not always a leading role. Rather, success also requires that we engage communities, share information, and appropriately participate in the development of community-led efforts to counter violent extremism.

While difficult, this is a challenge my colleagues at NCTC, together with our partners at DOJ, DHS, and the FBI, fully embrace. But we recognize that many of the best ideas will come from outside of government. This is why I feel very fortunate to participate in this discussion today, and I look forward to answering any questions you might have. Thank you very much.