

**Excerpts from Washington Institute Remarks
The Honorable Nicholas J. Rasmussen,
Director, National Counterterrorism Center
Monday, February 2, 2015**

After taking a look at the agenda, it is clear that you are looking both broadly and deeply at the ISIL phenomenon here today – the group’s ideology, foreign fighter population, and financial health. I look forward to hearing the results of today’s deliberations.

I also understand you’ll be hearing from General John Allen later today. General Allen is at the forefront of coordinating the many willing partners the United States has in degrading ISIL.

And along with Ambassador Brett McGuirk and CENTCOM Commander General Austin, he has spent more time than anybody else in our government talking to those partners about how they see the ISIL problem and what we can collectively do about it. So I am certain you will benefit from his perspective.

For my part, what I thought I would do is try and highlight the ways in which ISIL is unique among the counterterrorism challenges we face right now.

I will start with five specific challenges posed by ISIL, many of which will undoubtedly be familiar to an audience as expert and knowledgeable as this.

These aren’t the only five challenges, but they are the ones I spend the most time thinking about and worrying about from my seat at the National Counterterrorism Center.

Those challenges include:

- **ISIL’s agile, capable use of social media** to advance their narrative and amplify their battlefield success;
- The group’s seemingly **unfettered access to foreign fighters** from across the Middle East region and the globe, including a significant number from our own country;

- The group's demonstrated **ability to establish ISIL footholds in areas beyond its traditional AOR** in Iraq and Syria;
- ISIL's embrace of **the notion that it isn't only large-scale attacks that can have strategic impact** on the political landscape, that even small or modest sized attacks can dominate world media and generate disproportionate effects;
- And lastly, **ISIL's ability to co-opt the sectarian and theological struggle and conflict between Shia and Sunni**. I list this one last, in part because it's the ISIL challenge I find most difficult to get my head around in terms of developing a countering strategy. So maybe some of the experts in this room today can help in this regard.

I think an objective look at ISIL and their modus operandi reveals some vulnerabilities and weaknesses that we can exploit. I'll start with their declaration of the caliphate, I would argue, cut multiple ways in terms of its impact.

As I noted earlier, it certainly features in their propaganda as a means of drawing recruits, particularly from abroad.

But that somewhat strategic decision also brought with it some costs:

We've already seen that ISIL struggles with the burden of governance.

When the group has to not only take territory, but also to hold it and exercise governance over it, the costs and limitations brought about by their actions become more apparent and some of the group's characteristics become in effect, self-limiting.

One of those costs concerns the ongoing ideological conflict with al-Qa'ida. Declaring the caliphate likely ensured that the struggle with AQ would continue and perhaps deepen.

It guaranteed that the conflict with AQ was also about more than just personality conflicts and tactical arguments.

And that split creates a natural brake on the ability of ISIL to recruit successfully among the full population of Sunni extremists, including those with loyalty to al-Qa'ida.

Imagine ISIL and al-Qa'ida working together in support of common goals and you will see what I mean.

Taking on the burden of governing the caliphate also is self-limiting in a financial sense and I know some of your speakers later this morning will be able to address that in greater depth.

If you look at ISIL as purely a terrorist operation, then they are extremely well funded – far better than most terrorist organizations we have confronted over time.

But if ISIL purports to exercise state control over territory and to accept at least some of the burden of providing goods and services to the Sunni population they are controlling, then that financial picture looks less rosy and may turn out to be a vulnerability for the group over time.

ISIL may well find that it cannot meet even its own expectations in this regard, and shifting tribal loyalties in Iraq and Syria could turn against ISIL in their areas of control if the group is unable to meet basic demands for public services.

On the foreign fighter front, even as I have painted a pretty concerning picture in terms of the number of foreign fighters and their potential to do us harm, I can see a couple of things working in our favor:

First, the problem of foreign fighters has spurred information sharing among our many counterterrorism partners of the sort that we have rarely if ever seen.

The sense of shared, common threat and vulnerability extends across Europe, across North Africa and throughout the Middle East. As a result, intelligence and law enforcement services are working with each other, and with us, in closer cooperation than ever.

Our European colleagues are taking concrete steps to enhance their own ability to share information with each other about potential terrorists transiting their borders.

I think it is fair to say that we have more partners sharing more information about such travelers – including their own citizens – than at any time in my experience.

And it is this kind of identity related information that allows us to exercise the necessary levels of screening at our own borders and keep these individuals out of the United States.

The other piece of good news with respect to the foreign fighter problem is the increasing recognition among many of our partners that their existing legal frameworks are insufficient robust to counter threats like what we're seeing in Iraq and Syria.

A number of states have moved to criminalize travel to Iraq and Syria for terrorism related purposes.

And our Justice Department and FBI colleagues have worked with many partner states to explain our material support statutes and how they enable us to prosecute individuals who seek join or otherwise support terrorist groups.

I won't overstate the impact we've seen at this stage, and there is clearly a long way to go.

But I would say we are clearly heading in the right direction in terms of building the widest possible network of states that have both the will and capacity to interdict and disrupt the travel of foreign fighters

And lastly, and in a more parochial vein here in the Homeland, I think there are some factors working in our favor with respect to foreign fighters.

First, I would point to the relatively finite US pool of potential foreign fighters, at least when compared to what our European partners are experiencing.

That speaks to the greater success that we have had in assimilating immigrant communities.

That's not to say that we don't have a problem with extremism here in the United States and that we are invulnerable to the threat posed by ISIL in this regard. Not at all.

I'm simply saying that the problem is more manageably sized here in the United States, and that I believe we have the law enforcement and intelligence resources needed to counter it.

We have also seen a steady proliferation of more proactive, engaged, community awareness efforts across the United States, with the goal of giving communities the information and the tools they need to see extremism in their midst and do something about it before it manifests itself in violence.

Working with the Justice Department, the Department of Homeland Security, and with FBI, my officers are NCTC are engaged in this work all across the country, and I will point to just one example.

You will recall the case last year in which three young teenage girls attempted to travel from Denver to Syria by way of Frankfurt, Germany, where they were disrupted.

In the aftermath of that incident, we sent our officers on multiple occasions to meet with the greater Denver community and to raise awareness among community and law enforcement audiences about the terrorist recruitment threat.

The briefing is now tailored to address the specific issue of foreign fighter recruitment in Syria and Iraq. And we've received a strong demand signal for more such outreach.

This isn't a law enforcement oriented effort that could be perceived as heavy handed or intimidating. Rather, it's an effort to share information about how one community's children were being targeted and recruited to join terrorists overseas.

Seen in that light, we've had a remarkably positive reaction from the communities with whom we have engaged.

Again, I won't overstate or oversell our impact, and we clearly need to scale up our efforts so that we are doing this all across the country on a more industrial strength basis.

But I do take some encouragement from the receptivity we've seen in the communities with whom we have worked thus far.

The President will have his own opportunity to engage on these issues in coming weeks as he convenes a Summit dedicated to just this set of challenges.

And that event should give an important boost to our efforts to counter violent extremism both here in the US, but also abroad with our partners in Europe and the Middle East.

So, those are just a couple of reasons why I am in the end an optimist when it comes to countering ISIL's influence here inside the United States.

In the region, I would grant you that the ISIL problem is much more complex and the challenges much much greater. And that is why I'm so grateful that the Washington Institute organized today's event.

I'm sure General Allen would agree that we need all of the good ideas we can get to inform our efforts to build a successful strategy and to maintain a united coalition.

So I will stop there and take a few questions.