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“Wanted: Foreign Fighters – The Escalating Threat of ISIL in Central Asia” Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe (the Helsinki Commission)

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Chairman Smith, Co-Chairman Wicker and distinguished Members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on the issue of foreign terrorist fighters. Your leadership in examining this challenge is important because the threat to U.S. interests at home and abroad, and to U.S. allies, is both real and pressing. At the same time, we cannot go it alone: the threat spans national borders, which means that international cooperation and transnational solutions are required.

Allow me to begin with a word about how these remarks are organized. This testimony is structured with the bottom line up-front: a thumbnail sketch of the problem accompanied by key recommendations for action. This executive summary is then followed by additional details which serve as context and background for the crucial topline material. The latter is intended to serve as a resource for those with the time and inclination for a deep dive into the subject at hand.

The foreign fighter challenge is a matter of serious concern for the United States and its allies. While the foreign fighter phenomenon is not new, its present scale and scope is unprecedented. As individuals from the West travel to conflict zones around the world, they are forming new networks with discrete skills and they are amassing battle experience that may be turned around and redirected at their countries of origin. So-called returnees are a particular challenge for domestic law enforcement officials and intelligence agencies of the United States and its allies because such individuals possess cultural fluency and are able to walk amongst us. While tripwires such as exit and entry measures and controls are increasingly being adopted by the U.S. and Europe, it remains a challenge to identify and intervene before they cause actual harm, given the volume of individuals of concern. Communities and local authorities are at the tip of the spear in this regard because they are closest to the problem and are best placed to identify and prevent it before it fully materializes.

This problem is all the more complex as the U.S. draws down its engagement in Afghanistan. This conflict zone and others (such as the Maghreb and Sahel) are under-governed spaces where nefarious forces can thrive; and with respect to Syria and Iraq, ISIL actually controls territory. As the official U.S. presence tapers off in Afghanistan, particularly in the context of indigenous forces being either unable or unwilling to ramp up commensurately, our adversaries are afforded space and time in which to train, plan, plot and recruit.

Of course the problem is not confined to Afghanistan. To the contrary, a variation of the problem extends throughout Central Asia: as the Commission has pointed out, the so-called Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL) has attracted hundreds if not thousands of fighters from “the ‘stans”. These numbers demonstrate that the ideology and narrative of violent Islamist

extremist movements and groups continues to resonate with and successfully recruit individuals who are susceptible to such propaganda. In short, foreign fighters pose a threat to innocents within the conflict zones, to countries in the surrounding region, and to the broader international community. The crucial question, therefore, is: what can and should we do to combat this problem? Allow me to offer several suggestions. First, we need to combat the root of the problem which is the ideology upon which ISIL feeds and recruits. Pushing back on this narrative in order to expose its inherent inconsistencies and falsehoods must therefore be a crucial plank in both national and transnational strategy. Unless and until we combat the lifeblood of the jihadists in this way, their pool of recruits will continue to grow.

Second, there are many more operational activities, both within and across borders that can be deepened and broadened to achieve more robust (counterterrorist) outcomes. Specifically, the United States must continue to work in tandem with its allies within the "Five Eyes" intelligence alliance, and expand its cooperation in this area to other countries in Europe and beyond. Information is the crucial component that underlies virtually all counterterrorism efforts, both domestic and cross-border; hence we must maximize the intelligence that US officials and their counterparts in allied nations possess in order to best formulate and execute the measures that will keep foreign fighters' plans left of boom.

Third, the United States should work with the countries of Central Asia to assist them in building the capacities that are necessary for them to be their own best guardians. For instance, more could be done in the area of border security (including sharing best practices in this field) in order to clamp down on the freedom of travel currently experienced by foreign fighter aspirants and returnees.

The measures recommended above are intended to complement, deepen and extend ongoing OSCE work which leverages the Organization's unique strengths and abilities. Thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today. I look forward to trying to answer any questions that you may have. And I hope that you find the detailed explanatory material below useful.

Context

The current terrorist threat climate is reminiscent of that prior to 9/11, marked by budget cuts and the rollback of hard-earned gains. The emergence of ISIL, along with active terrorist groups in Nigeria, Mali, Yemen, Libya, and Somalia, pose a set of unprecedented challenges. The most notable: foreign fighters. These individuals constitute a critical threat to the security of the United States and our allies. Foreign fighters and bridge figures -- the latter equipped with the cross-cultural fluency to punch up and spread the radicalizing message across a broader pool of recruits -- come from a myriad of backgrounds, but share a common ability to move across borders, extend conflict zones, bolster insurgent factions both operationally and motivationally, and threaten the territorial integrity of their home countries upon return.¹ ISIL has attracted well over 20,000 foreign fighters (at least 4,000 of whom Western, including 150 Americans) from nearly 90 nationalities.² Bridge figures play a key role in radicalizing and recruiting Westerners, as was the case when an Uzbek-American from Brooklyn was charged with radicalizing three other Central Asian-Americans and funding their

¹ "Bridge figures" are defined as primary actors in the radicalization process and serve as a major catalyst for recruitment. Frank J. Cilluffo, Jeffrey B. Cozzens, and Magnus Ranstorp, *Foreign Fighters Trends, Trajectories & Conflict Zones* (Washington D.C.: The George Washington Homeland Security Policy Institute, 2010), 2. ²Peter Neumann, "Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s," *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation*, January 26, 2015, <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/> ³ transit to join ISIL in Syria.³ Countering the extremist threat -- abroad and at home -- will require robust international and domestic partnerships emboldened by a clear-cut foreign policy and strategy.

Foreign fighters and bridge figures internationalize local conflicts, drawing the attention of Western media, promoting the jihadist cause, and recreating recruits among populations. Moreover, these conflicts became extended through time and space; forming networks and cells through which ideology, manpower, and expertise are exchanged across borders. The first conflict that involved mobilized Islamic foreign fighters for the sake of jihad was the Afghan-Soviet War from 1979 to 1992. The modern notion of individual obligation as a religious duty was popularized by founding member of al-Qaeda Abdullah Azzam. Throughout the 1990s, similar reasoning was used by foreign fighters during the Bosnian War, First Chechen War, and Somali conflict.

Many foreign fighters end up returning to their home countries, radicalized, jobless, and well-trained. Such was the case after the Soviet-Afghan war, as thousands of Arab foreign fighters leveraged personal contacts with former comrades and bridge figures to form decentralized cells and networks across the Middle East and North Africa. This nascent, but growing jihadist

scene produced a spate of violent attacks against the U.S. and its allies, Arab governments, and Israel. Led by Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda emerged as the ideological and operational vanguard of jihadism, inspiring the 1993 attempted bombing of the World Trade Center, orchestrating the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in East Africa, funding local militias in Bosnia and Somalia, and staging the 9/11 attacks in 2001.

At the same time, Afghanistan -- thrown onto the back burner by both foreign jihadists and American policy-makers -- continued to collapse under the weight of civil war. Central Asian fighters; the peoples from Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, long oppressed by their own authoritarian, secular governments, flocked to the new dominant force in the region -- the Taliban. The Taliban provided Central Asian combatants with a clear banner to mobilize and fight under and shielded bin Laden after 9/11. Despite being toppled by the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in 2002, the Taliban resurged in 2006 with the help of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), other Central Asians,

3“Fourth Brooklyn, New York, Resident Charged With Attempt and Conspiracy to Provide Material Support to ISIL”, Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, April 6, 2015, <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/fourth-brooklyn-new-york-resident-charged-attempt-and-conspiracy-provide-material-support> 4 Chechens, and Caucasians. The U.S. military operations in Iraq in 2003 forced a shift in administrative energy, resources, and troops away from the Afghan theater, allowing both the Taliban to re-emerge under the regime of Hamid Karzai and al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) led by Abu Musab az-Zarqawi, to expand in the Levant. It is significant to note AQI is ISIL’s predecessor. Up until this time period, the international jihadist network consisted of al-Qaeda “core” -- bin Laden and his small cadre of commanders -- and its various affiliates. Islamic insurgencies and localized, homegrown cells sprouted up through these overlapping logistical, financial, and personal networks.

The fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and eruption of region wide uprisings in 2011 provided a set of completely unique circumstances under which jihadists could threaten Western interests. As opposed al-Qaeda core’s priority of hitting the “far enemy”, or the U.S. and the West, the Islamic State or ISIL emphasized and was successful at consolidating and governing territory. It has done so in Syria, Iraq, and Libya; supported by cells across the region and world. ISIL’s declaration of the “Caliphate” in June 2014 bolstered by a sophisticated, savvy media campaign -- two things al-Qaeda never fully achieved -- has given it unprecedented legitimacy and appeal in the eyes of foreign fighters. ISIL has attracted well over 20,000 foreign fighters (at least 4,000 of whom Western) from nearly 90 nationalities.⁴ To provide a sense of scale, these numbers are unprecedented compared to the Soviet-Afghan War, which attracted 5,000 Muslims from around the world, the Chechnya conflict 1,000 fighters, Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan 1,000, and Operation Iraqi Freedom 4,000.

With most of the international community’s attention on Syria and Iraq, a loss of focus on Afghanistan can lead to the rollback of hard-earned gains that had been achieved through the investment of \$686 billion and, most importantly, the lives of over 2,000 of our men and women in uniform. If the U.S. ends military operations in Afghanistan by the scheduled January 20 2016 deadline, we run the risk of allowing the Taliban, both al-Qaeda and ISIL-backed elements, to carve out safe havens. Given the freedom to operate in such havens, there is a greater likelihood foreign terrorist organizations will be better positioned to plan and conduct attacks against the U.S. and Europe. The key to the Taliban’s survival and success: Central Asian fighters. If the U.S. can cooperate with regional and international allies to not only stem the growth of Western jihadism, but also the free flow of Central Asian militants to and from Afghanistan -- some pro-ISIL

4 <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-state-a-video-introduction> 5 <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-state-a-video-introduction> 5 and some not -- then the security of the American homeland and our allies will be better addressed.

ISIL and Central Asia

While most of the international community is focused on Syria and Iraq, a regional crisis is brewing in Central Asia and Afghanistan. The activation and growth of Central Asian foreign fighter networks pose three acute threats to U.S. security. First, these individuals provide direct support to ISIL’s foothold in the Levant and stand to protract the conflict found there. Second, when these fighters return to their home countries, many will use the financial, logistical, and military skills acquired in the Levant and Afghanistan to form cells and groups in Central Asia. Third, the entrance of ISIL-branded elements in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) internationalizes the fight against a Taliban rejuvenated by Central Asian foreign fighters.

Direct Support

ISIL has made clear that it intends to engage heavily with Central Asian Islamists. In January, its leadership began a charm offensive and leveraged their position as an anti-establishment, Islamic alternative to the region's secular regimes. ISIL's leadership has been able to claim some level of religious authority, as it has effectively exposed the (fairly naked) ties that moderating voices have to the government. This political positioning has been bolstered by promises of economic opportunity, with advertised salaries ranging as high as \$5,000 per month. In contrast to the glossy tactics used to attract Western fighters, social media plays a more limited role. The 'old pulls' of economic opportunity and an outlet of political expression foster a deeper support and will require a corresponding countering violent extremism strategy.

The approach has been quite successful to date—some estimates hold that 4,000 Central Asian foreign fighters have begun to fight in the Levant. According to the International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR), there are an estimated 500 Uzbeks, 360 Turkmen, 250 Kazaks, 190 Tajiks, and 100 Kyrgyzs, bolstered by 1,500 Caucasians and 800-1,500 Russians fighting in Syria.⁷ According to the U.S. Counter-Terrorism Center, there are more than 1,000 Kazakhs fighting for ISIL.⁸ Like Western foreign fighters, Central Asians provide propaganda and language services for

6<http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/reports-analysis/report/isis-central-asia-growing-threat>
7<http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriaraq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>
8http://www.csce.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=ContentRecords.ViewDetail&ContentRecord_id=1199&ContentRecordType=P&ContentType=P 6

recruitment abroad. In Syria and Iraq, Central Asians are divided along ethnic and linguistic lines into jamaats, or factions. Some of the most prominent ones like the Uzbek factions Katibat al-Imam Bukhari and Sabri's Jamaat -- both of which operate in northern Syria alongside 1,500 veteran Caucasian fighters -- have pledged allegiance to ISIL.⁹ These factions mostly operate out of northern Syria, contributing to ISIL's dominance in Raqqa and never-ending attempts to take Aleppo, Idlib, and Latakia. In the absence of U.S. Special Forces and human assets on the ground to guide air strikes, these fighters enjoy more time to train, plot, and execute attacks against moderate Syrian rebels.

Cell Formation

Central Asians and Caucasians not only fill the rank-and-file, but also important leadership positions. ISIL's Central Asian commanders with previous military experience -- for example, ISIL's northern Syria Emir Umar al-Shishani, a former Special Reconnaissance soldier in the Georgian Army and Tajikistan's former Special Forces chief Gulmurod Khalimov -- are particularly dangerous for several reasons.¹⁰ These fighters, through mosques, prayer rooms, and personal connections, have been able to recruit and radicalize hundreds of Central Asian youth alongside ISIL. The combination of a committed leadership pool and a broadened domestic base imbues the region with the necessary raw materials for violent Islamist organizations to form domestically. As leaders begin to convert their operational and administrative knowledge into active terror cells, Central Asian governments may be forced to contend with new threats.

These fronts will be further enhanced by returning foreign fighters. Central Asian Islamist groups -- driven by the desire to establish a transnational Caliphate across the region since the 1990s -- have a long history of armed opposition to both pre- and post-Soviet regimes. The success of these groups spawned a plethora of decentralized Islamist extremist groups. Some engaged American and Pakistani troops in Afghanistan and Pakistan and others remained at home to conduct bomb attacks and assassination of regime targets. In essence, Islamist militancy in Central Asia -- long cultivated by a history of social and economic oppression by secular police states -- spawned a cadre of battle-hardened jihadis bent on transiting from one conflict zone to another to establish an Islamic state. It is no accident that the IMU experienced a

9<http://jihadology.net/2014/07/22/al-%E1%B8%A5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-join-the-ranks/> <http://www.rferl.org/content/under-black-flag-central-asia-militants-allegiance/26666098.html> 10
<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-32917311> 7

pronounced period of resurgence, immediately following the return of Taliban-affiliated foreign fighters from Afghanistan. The result in Central Asia could prove to be an existential threat for some of the region's governments.

Conflict Convergence

Foreign fighter recruitment has served as a platform from which ISIL has grown its physical presence. In September, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan—one of the region’s most active terror organizations—effectively severed its ties to the Taliban and pledged allegiance to ISIL’s leadership. The move represented a large swing of momentum in ISIL’s favor and was accompanied by the emergence of ISIL-affiliated fighters in Northern Afghanistan’s Kunduz Province. From here, operations have expanded into parts even less easily governed. The Fergana Valley—a remote region that is incorporated into parts of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—has the beginnings of a promising haven for returning ISIS fighters. And—as we saw in the April attacks in Eastern Afghanistan—ISIL will challenge Taliban territories in and around the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

The most pressing concern lies in the FATA, however. Here, ISIL and the Taliban are poised to battle one another for regional supremacy. Syria’s own civil war has shown that national militaries are ill-suited to maintain territorial integrity, while combatting two rival adversaries. In particular, an unproven Afghan National Army (ANA) stands particularly vulnerable to these challenges. Geographically challenging borders stand to exacerbate the problem and will likely be exploited by transnational groups who can more easily move materiel across national borders. Ultimately, decisive action will be required if countries around the world are to deny ISIL a stronghold that has lent its occupier the ability to stage more destructive attacks.

Remedies

In order to stem ISIL’s further expansion into Central Asia and Afghanistan, the United States needs to work with domestic and international partners to ensure both short and long-term security. The instability in Afghanistan is largely attributed to the conflating violence in Syria and Iraq, as it is reported that 2,000-4,000 Central Asians are fighting on behalf of ISIL.¹¹ These individuals are leveraging the political and economic marginalization of Muslim communities to recruit and radicalize others. The police states of Central Asia view ISIL not only as a security threat, but also an excuse to

¹¹<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/b072-syria-calling-radicalisation-in-central-asia.aspx> 8

crack down on political dissent -- further crushing prospects of political and social change. Circumstances warrant a security-oriented strategy that reunites and enhances our relationship with the “Five Eyes” (U.S., United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand), the world’s strongest and most valuable counter-terrorism partnership. We can take various lessons from this dynamic and expand it to our European Union, transatlantic, and then, Central Asian partners to fully curtail the foreign fighter and homegrown threat. On the other hand, to prevent the opening up of terrorist safe havens in Afghanistan and possible collapse of the nascent Kabul government and Afghan National Army (ANA), the United States should not make the same mistake as it did when disengaging from Afghanistan in 2003 and Iraq in 2011. Foreign fighter pipelines have intensified, requiring even more determination, focus, and willpower to sustain our counter-terrorism and military efforts in the FATA. First, the U.S. needs to take on a clear yet broad-based stand against foreign fighters. This may include a more concerted effort to enforce U.N. Security Resolution 2178 (2014), which lays out appropriate measures on preventing interstate travel of foreign fighters, enforcing proper information-sharing practices within national security systems, and criminalizing terrorist activity.¹² In terms of counteracting Western foreign fighters, the Five Eyes may consider expanding intelligence cooperation to include other European nations that suffer from radicalization and extremism, such as Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Belgium, France, Norway, Spain, Italy, and to a controlled degree Turkey, the Balkan states, and Central Asia. Integrating European and Central Asian intelligence can provide the necessary framework for broader, more global law enforcement information-sharing equipped with secure communications networks, databases, and a system of notices, plus measures to track illicit money transfers, stolen, forged identity papers and travel documents.

An example of the present lack of critical information sharing is the relative ease in transferring personnel and resources from the Levant, either through Turkey and the Caucasus and across the Caspian Sea or overland through northern Iran, into Afghanistan. Travel to Turkey is visa-free for citizens of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, while Uzbeks can get a 30-day visa upon arrival.¹³ Intelligence sharing between Turkish authorities and Central Asian security services is lackluster. As one of its NATO allies, the U.S. should encourage Turkey to re-evaluate

¹²http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2178.pdf

13<http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/central-asia/b072-syria-calling-radicalisation-in-central-asia.pdf> 9

its liberal travel controls and cooperate more with Central Asian nations. In order for this to occur, there needs to be greater efforts to identify and investigate potential foreign fighters. There are several mechanisms designed to maintain and improve border management in Central Asia, including the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA). BOMCA is a European Union-U.N. Development Programme joint venture meant to promote stability and security of Central Asian nation-states through integrated, modernized border management.¹⁴ Originally conceived to combat the illicit transit of goods and personnel across Central Asia, BOMCA should be develop the capacity -- through U.S. and European assistance -- to combat foreign fighter migrations. This means more intelligence sharing to help border security officials identify, apprehend, and ultimately prosecute violent extremists. The OSCE has two lines of programming that can assist the BOMCA in beefing up border practices: border management and combating terrorism.¹⁵ However OSCE and BOMCA activities are not streamlined and they lack information sharing amongst themselves, let alone between the nation-states they are attempting to help.¹⁶

To make border management more geared towards counter-terrorism, it is worth considering creating a liaison office that integrates the OSCE and BOMCA offices with the Joint Plan for Action for Central Asian States under the U.N. Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and Istanbul Process. The former enables all states to agree on a broad strategy to combat terrorism. A major issue is the sluggish process of implementation across national contexts and regional relationships.¹⁷ The Istanbul Process, focused on security and development, also faces issues of integration and implementation. Kazakhstan, the largest Central Asian nation, is not formally a member in the Process's counter-terrorism section.¹⁸

Better border management with an orientation towards counter-terrorism and transnational security will reduce the spillover of violence into northern Afghanistan, where the Taliban and ISIL-affiliated groups are not only fighting each other, but also the ANA. ISIL's goal is to one day merge its Wilayat al-Khorasan, or "Khorasan 14
http://www.undp.org/content/brussels/en/home/partnerships_initiatives/results/bomca.html

15 <http://www.osce.org/secretariat/110768> 16 Law, David. "Intergovernmental Organisations and Security Sector Reform"
17<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/12/26/counter-terrorism-in-central-asia-requires-international-cooperation/> 18<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/12/26/counter-terrorism-in-central-asia-requires-international-cooperation/> 10

Province" with its territory in Syria and Iraq. This prospect is unlikely, but constitutes a direct threat to Afghanistan. President Obama's rapid withdrawal of American troops from Iraq in 2011 should serve as a valuable lesson in maintaining our political, economic, and humanitarian commitment to Afghanistan. In Iraq, our lack of presence in the post-withdrawal period afforded then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki a complete mandate to fill political and military ranks with Shiite loyalists, dilapidating an Iraqi military that the United States had spent \$25 billion to train and equip.¹⁹ The Sunni population was marginalized and pushed into the arms of a rejuvenated ISIL. To avoid a similar situation in Afghanistan -- where the United States has spent \$686 billion since 2001 -- American military officials, in tandem with Kabul, should continue to pressure Taliban and ISIL-affiliated elements with counter-terrorism and military operations led by Special Forces and covert elements to earmark airstrikes.²⁰ The continued presence of U.S. troops will help the ANA prevent the Taliban or ISIL from taking over and consolidating territory and forming potential safe havens.

A consistent ANA campaign backed by U.S. airstrikes will subsequently strengthen the Afghan government's position in negotiations with the Taliban. The best option is to leave the U.S. troop withdrawal deadline unknown to the international community and U.S. public. Once the Taliban and ISIL know the definite date, they will hunker down, wait out the drone strikes, and re-emerge to feast on the ANA. Air strikes and presence of American operatives dramatically increases the costs for the Taliban to operate in the open, maintain pipelines to other parts of the region, facilitate transit, and build training camps. This gives our enemies less time to train, plot, and execute terrorist attacks while giving our allies more time to train, obtain experience, and become a more competent fighting force. Plus, If Ghani reaches a tentative deal with the Taliban, ISIL's position will be significantly weakened. ISIL, which already clashes with the Taliban over territory and ideological legitimacy, risks opening up a second front with its Pashto rivals.

19<http://www.stripes.com/us-advisers-hope-realistic-training-scenarios-help-iraqi-troops-face-islamic-state-fighters-1.343931>
20 <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL33110.pdf> 11