



Committee on  
**HOMELAND SECURITY**  
Chairman Michael McCaul

*Opening Statement*

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**Media Contact:** April Ward  
(202) 226-8417

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**Statement of Subcommittee Chairman Peter King (R-NY)  
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence  
Committee on Homeland Security**

**Jihadist Safe Havens: Efforts to Detect and Deter Terrorist Travel**

**Remarks as Prepared**

Today we know that at least 100 Americans have traveled or attempted to travel to Syria for the purpose of joining an Islamist extremist group, either al Nusrah Front, the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS), or another. We also know that several thousand individuals from European nations have flocked to Syria, and likely now Iraq, for the same purpose.

Fifteen months ago, this Subcommittee held a hearing on the growing threat posed to the Homeland from al Qaeda, which focused on foreign fighters from around the world converging on the war zone Syria. Since that time, from all accounts the situation has dramatically worsened. The number of al Qaeda affiliated and jihadist groups have multiplied. In May 2014, FBI Director Comey noted that the current Syrian conflict “is an order of magnitude” worse than Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s. And with stunning velocity, the group formerly known as al Qaeda in Iraq has evolved into the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, and established what it calls a caliphate that spans across portions of Iraq and Syria.

While core al Qaeda leadership may have diminished capacity, in recent months they have sought to rebuild as US forces withdraw from Afghanistan, and al Qaeda affiliates around the world are as strong as ever. ISIS has ruthlessly captured cities, killed indiscriminately, and mobilized thousands of foreign fighters to its cause. It moves its men and arms at will into safe havens on both sides of the Iraqi-Syrian border.

At least one American has died as a suicide bomber after spending two months in a training camp operated by al Nusrah Front in Aleppo. Twenty-two year old Moner Mohammed Abusalha, who was born and raised in Florida and reportedly traveled to Syria in late 2013, and blew himself up in an attack in Syria on May 25, 2014.

The threat is not limited to U.S. persons fighting and being radicalized overseas, or constrained to battlefields in Syria and Iraq. On May 24th, French jihadist and Syrian war veteran Mehdi Nemmouche attacked a Jewish museum in Brussels.

Compounding the threat is the potential for terror groups to coordinate and share expertise, as well as fighters. Last month, we all followed press reports that members of al Nusrah had possibly linked up with bomb-making experts from al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The potent combination of AQAP's bomb-making expertise and al Nusrah's large pool of radical converts including U.S. and European passport holders, poses a significant threat to the Homeland. These concerns recently caused the U.S. to require additional security measures at certain foreign airports to enhance screening of travelers and luggage on U.S.-bound flights.

Attorney General Eric Holder's comments that "the Syrian conflict has turned that region into a cradle of violent extremism," are important. As he said, the world cannot let it become a training ground from which our nationals can return and launch attacks." Unfortunately, as we have seen far too often, words from key Administration officials, including the President, have not translated into plans and action. Political instability and American disengagement in the region has created the conditions allowing radical jihadism to re-generate and metastasize.

It is essential that the White House articulates American interests in the region, and elicits greater cooperation from European and foreign partners to identify and track individuals seeking to join extremist groups. As the diaspora of fighters and ideology spreads, there will be long-term consequences and a direct threat to the U.S. and the West. It is time for the Administration to implement a plan to safeguard the Homeland before Westerners who have become further radicalized in these conflicts are sent home to carry out attacks.

I would like to welcome back Mr. Simcox and Dr. Jones, who testified at our hearing last year. It appears that over the last year the situation on the ground have gotten substantially worse for American interests in the region. To put ISIS's growth in perspective – a group not discussed a year ago now controls large portions of territory in Syria and Iraq and poses a significant threat to the United States.

I look forward to the panel's update, with the additional input from Dr. Kagan and Dr. Brookes, on the spreading conflict and would like to thank our distinguished panel of witnesses in advance.

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