

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson*****Jihadist Safe Havens: Efforts to Detect and Deter Terrorist Travel***

July 24, 2014 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for Counterterrorism and Intelligence subcommittee hearing entitled “Jihadist Safe Havens: Efforts to Detect and Deter Terrorist Travel”:

“As the Committee continues examine the homeland security implications of foreign fighting, it is important to revisit the facts that have lead us to this point. As fighting continues across Syria, government forces and their allies are being pitted against a range of anti-government insurgents. The disorder is so rampant that at times, many of these insurgent groups are even fighting amongst themselves.

While the total population of Syria is more than 22 million, the Civil War has driven more than 2.8 million Syrians into neighboring countries as refugees, since March 2011. Millions more Syrians are internally displaced and in need of humanitarian assistance, of which the United States remains the largest bilateral provider, with more than \$2 billion in funding.

The United States also has allocated a total of \$287 million to provide nonlethal assistance to select groups. While it is difficult to know exactly what is happening on the ground in Syria, as it changes day-to-day, it seems neither pro-Assad forces nor their opponents are capable of achieving outright victory in the short term.

In the interim, conflict between the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and other anti-Assad forces has also caused an increase in war fighting. Outside of Syria, the Syrian Civil War has caused an increase of religious-sect and political group conflicts in Iraq and Lebanon. It is clear that the Syrian conflict has national security implications that can be felt across the globe.

However, the current humanitarian and security crises within Syria are beyond the power of any single actor to resolve, including the United States. Top U.S. officials have made public statements warning that Syria-based extremists may pose a direct terrorist threat to the United States, including some foreign fighters who hold U.S., Canadian, or European passports.

Director of National Intelligence James Clapper has stated that an Al Qaeda-affiliated group within Syria “does have aspirations for attacks on the homeland.”

Central Intelligence Agency Director, John Brennan, has publically identified Al Qaeda-tied groups and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) within Syria as a concern for the recruitment of individuals and the development of capabilities to be able to carry out attacks inside of Syria and also to use Syria as a launching pad.

In February of this year, as his first public address as Secretary, Department of Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson acknowledged that Syria has become a matter of homeland security.

He did so because U.S. law-enforcement and intelligence officials know individuals from North America and Europe are heading to Syria and will be exposed to radical and extremist influences before possibly returning to their home countries with intent to do harm.

Amid all the human suffering, in-fighting, and homeland security implications, it may seem lost that the Syrian conflict was once a mass civic movement advocating for greater political freedom.

It is imperative for us to focus diplomatic efforts on coordinating with foreign fighter source, transit, and returnee destination countries to strengthen shared responses and preventive measures. I hope our conversation today provides insight into the full scope of the foreign fighter issues and how both U.S. and international officials can work to coordinate both intelligence and response efforts.”

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