

Testimony before the Subcommittee on Intelligence and Counterterrorism

House Committee on Homeland Security

June 23, 2020 10:00 AM

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, Honorable Members of the Subcommittee,

It is a privilege to be here and speak with you today on the subject of examining the potential threat emanating from ISIS and al Qaeda. The esteemed panel of witnesses you have assembled are all veterans of the U.S. government struggle to contain the threat of terrorism over the past years and ensure the security of the homeland.

All of them, and I as well, have grappled with the key questions of how we can best protect our borders, how we can enlist our overseas partners in the counterterrorism effort, and how we can – or perhaps better said, *whether* we can – do anything to destroy the root causes of the terrorist problem. That last question, in particular, has consumed a considerable amount of time and attention, and I wish I could say we have made great strides in eliminating the underlying sources of terrorism. Unfortunately, I don't think that is the case, but I will come back to that in a moment.

When I became the State Department Coordinator for Counterterrorism, a statutorily created position designed to centralize all Department efforts on terrorism and provide advice directly to the Secretary of State on these matters, as well as coordinate closely through the National Security Council with other institutional players on CT and homeland security, it was the beginning of 2014. Quite frankly, no one – perhaps other than intelligence analysts sprinkled throughout our system – had heard of ISIS as a feature of global terrorism. When I left the job in 2016 to become the Acting Assistant Secretary for Political Military Affairs at the State Department, the world had changed dramatically. In the span of about a year, ISIS had gone from a small regional leftover presence from the first Iraqi war to a global threat – almost as virulent in its own way as the COVID-19 virus pandemic now.

How did this happen? What was the difference between ISIS and other terrorist groups that had preceded it, even including al Qaeda, which – though highly dangerous and deadly – could not hold a candle to ISIS in its rate of expansion or degree of lethality (and in fact there were places in the world where al Qaeda lost membership to ISIS as a competitor)? The answer lies in the ISIS-created tools and methodologies, which had never before been utilized as successfully by any other group. Social media became a vital hunting grounds for signing up an ISIS foreign component and building support outside of Iraq and Syria. The West – and not only the West, but those countries where recruitment was especially large scale, like Indonesia or Jordan – were completely unprepared for these new approaches and unable to muster the flexibility to push back. Governments, for the most part, and certainly democratic governments, are neither comfortable nor effective as propaganda or counter-propaganda machines.

That put us all on the defensive more than the offensive, and although we have gotten better at what we do, that is still largely where we find ourselves. We do a better job these days at protecting our borders and weeding out the individuals whose intentions may be problematic. We have convinced many of our neighbors and our European and other global allies that by enforcing their own borders and encouraging a more robust law enforcement effort, they benefit both themselves and the United States. We have stymied many attacks and worked with communities across the U.S., including immigrant communities, to address the threat before it manifests itself in an attack on the ground.

However, many issues remain. One is a resource problem – we can only have so many priorities at a time. At the outset of the administration, the White House and Defense Department drafted a new set of National Security and Defense Security strategy documents to guide our efforts, and it was decided that we had permitted our capabilities vis a vis the great powers – specifically Russia and China – to atrophy, necessitating a renewed push to regain our position in key parts of the world. The war on terrorism, though important, was no longer the first or only objective. All resource allocations are a function of strategic priorities and necessities, and this is something that I believe needs to be constantly reassessed. If we wish to push back on terrorism, we will need to consider whether, for example, AFRICOM should have a larger or smaller presence in the Sahel and elsewhere in the African continent, or whether those resources – drones, personnel, etc. – are more useful elsewhere.

Finally, I return to the question of whether we can truly eliminate the sources of terrorism such that we would be able to wipe it out entirely and be able with clear conscience to move our resources to other efforts. I remain skeptical this is fully possible. As I indicated, governments are not good at public relations – they and their PR contractors are inherently subject to suspicion no matter how clever we think we are in getting out a message. Nor is the elimination of poverty or the creation of income-generating programs overseas likely to quash the terrorist impulse, which is the idea behind the money being thrown towards what's referred to as CVE or Combatting Violent Extremism. It's most often not the desperately hungry or work-starved individual who turns to terrorism; it's the disaffected youth whose immigrant parents probably tried hard to provide him or her a better life and instead found their offspring attracted by the ISIS or extremist message. We need to be vigilant in finding and dealing with this small but potent group, here in the U.S. and overseas, and ensure we are able to stop any potential violence before it comes to us.

I'm sure we'll have a stimulating conversation today, so I will stop here and allow the rest of the proceedings to move forward.