



One Hundred Thirteenth Congress
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20515

August 8, 2014

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

The battlefields in Syria and Iraq have drawn an unprecedented number of foreign fighters to the region, including many from the West, which presents a unique and direct threat to the Homeland. Senior U.S. government officials have publicly expressed their concerns with the foreign fighter trend, specifically pointing to the potential for terror safe havens in Syria and Iraq to serve as training grounds for foreign fighters who can return to the U.S. and launch an attack.

The threat population extends beyond radicalized U.S. citizens returning from the Syrian-Iraqi theater and includes other Western passport holders. The numbers of Europeans who have traveled to Syria to join jihadists groups are in the thousands.¹ The attack on a Jewish museum in Brussels on May 24, 2014, believed to be perpetrated by French jihadist and Syrian war veteran Mehdi Nemmouche, illustrates that the targets are not limited to a fighter's country of origin² and that these fighters can and will leave the battlefield with intentions to carry out terror attacks.

It is critical that the U.S. continually evaluates and improves programs to detect and deter foreign fighters. To that end, we have directed Committee staff to engage in an end-to-end review of applicable government programs and authorities. We are writing to request GAO's assistance with a review of the Visa Waiver Program (VWP).

The VWP currently permits citizens from 38 countries to enter the United States for tourism or business for 90 days or less. These travelers are not required to obtain a travel visa and therefore are not interviewed by a Department of State (State) consular officer before arriving at a U.S. port of entry. As a result, counterterrorism officials have raised concerns that citizens of VWP countries who have spent time in Syria and have become radicalized by al Qaeda-affiliated

¹ Peter R. Neumann, "How to Curb the Threat of Homecoming Jihadist Fighters," *New Scientist*, June 25, 2014. (Available at: <http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn25784-how-to-curb-the-threat-of-homecoming-jihadist-fighters.html#.U8a9svldV8E>)

² Daniel Milton, Bryan Price, Muhammad al-Ubaydi, "The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant: More than Just a June Surprise," *CTC Sentinel*, June 2014. (Available at: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/CTCSentinel-Vol7Iss6.pdf>)

groups, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and others, could return home and then attempt to travel to the United States to carry out an attack.

A number of steps have been taken over the years to improve VWP security, including the creation of the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) and a requirement that all VWP countries enter into agreements to share information with the United States on whether citizens and nationals of that country traveling under the program represent a threat to the security or welfare of the United States.

We request that GAO review Department of Homeland Security (DHS) policies, procedures, and actions to reduce the threat of foreign fighters returning from Syria to their Western countries and subsequently gaining access to the U.S. via VWP. Specifically, please answer the following questions:

- (1) To what extent is DHS tracking the number of foreign fighters from VWP eligible countries?
- (2) What steps have DHS and other federal agencies taken, if any, to prevent foreign fighters who have returned to their home countries from entering the United States under the Visa Waiver Program?
- (3) What is the status of the information sharing agreements between the U.S. and VWP countries to ensure that citizens of VWP countries traveling under the program do not represent a threat to the security or welfare of the United States?
- (4) How does DHS identify travelers who may pose a threat? What role do programs like ESTA, and information sharing agreements, like Passenger Name Recognition (PNR) Agreements help to prevent terrorists from traveling to the United States?
- (5) What role have DHS International programs, such as the Immigration Advisory Program and Global Entry had in preventing foreign fighters from entering the United States?

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue. If you have any questions or need additional information, please contact Dr. R. Nicholas Palarino with the Committee on Homeland Security Majority Staff at (202) 226-8417.

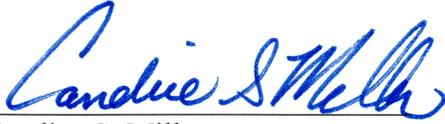
Sincerely,



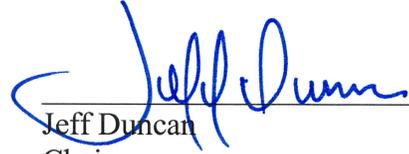
Michael T. McCaul
Chairman



Peter T. King
Chairman
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism
and Intelligence



Candice S. Miller
Chairman
Subcommittee on Border and
Maritime Security



Jeff Duncan
Chairman
Subcommittee on Oversight and
Management Efficiency



Patrick Meehan
Chairman
Subcommittee on Cybersecurity,
Infrastructure, and Security
Technologies



Susan Brooks
Chairman
Subcommittee on Emergency
Preparedness, Response, and
Communications



Richard Hudson
Chairman
Subcommittee on Transportation
Security