



## HOMELAND SECURITY COMMITTEE

### Statement of Task Force Chairman Mike Gallagher (R-WI) Task Force on Denying Terrorists Entry to the United States

“Denying Terrorists Entry to the United States: Examining Visa Security”  
May 3, 2017

Remarks as Prepared

I want to start by welcoming back our expert witnesses to the Capitol and thank them for being here today, as well as for the classified briefing we had yesterday. I look forward to following up on some of the broader themes of the briefing in order to inform the American people of the security of the visa process and the Visa Waiver Program. I also want to thank Chairman McCaul and Ranking Member Thompson for prioritizing this Task Force and its mission.

Last Congress, this Committee’s *Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel* was not only successful in producing legislative change, but also eye opening in what it revealed. The work done by Members and staff on both sides of the aisle, under Chairman Katko’s leadership, raised awareness about gaps in screening and information sharing—both at home and with our foreign partners—which ultimately led to positive reforms for protecting the homeland against terrorists and foreign fighters. This of course includes the Visa Waiver Program Improvement and Terrorist Travel Prevention Act that enacted major VWP reforms into law in 2015. I hope that this *Task Force on Denying Terrorists Entry into the United States* will be as successful in its investigation and final recommendations. And I look forward to working with Ms. Watson Coleman and all the Members on both sides to ensure that it is a success.

This is a critical time for our nation’s security. The previous task force rightly focused on the tens of thousands of jihadist fighters traveling from the West to join the fight on the ground in Iraq and Syria. Now, however, we see that number dropping as those fighters seek to expand their actions beyond Iraq and Syria. And while coalition forces continue to advance and squeeze ISIS territory, the threat against the West continues to rise as the fighters leave the so-called caliphate. As FBI Director Comey said this past September, “through the fingers of that crush are going to come hundreds of very, very dangerous people...There will be a terrorist diaspora sometime in the next two to five years like we’ve never seen before.”

Those chilling words should serve as a wakeup call. Just last week, it was reported that two British nationals and a U.S. citizen were detained by Turkish border police after spending over two years in ISIS territory. With hundreds of American fighters and thousands of European fighters—armed with lawful passports, terrorist training, and jihadist connections—seeking to return to their home countries, we must be able to prevent them from gaining entry into the United States by abusing our immigration system. ISIS has already planned, conducted, or inspired more than 180 plots against the West, including the 2015 attacks in Paris, and the 2016 attacks in Brussels, Nice, and Berlin. The majority of these attackers were European citizens with valid passports, so it is easy to imagine any one of them gaining access to this country through a valid visa or through the Visa Waiver Program. And as Secretary Kelly recently said, the U.S. is “the prime

terrorist target,” especially since so many of these fighters are citizens of VWP countries. But that is why we are here today—to ensure that our defenses are strong and to protect the Homeland as it continues to be targeted.

While there are numerous benefits to our country that stem from our welcoming immigration system—like tourism, trade, and business—we should never cease to examine our processes through the lens of a terrorist in search potential gaps. We must always strive to stay one step ahead. That is what we learned in the wake of September 11th, where all of the attackers entered the U.S. through legal means, mainly through lawful tourist visas. This of course prompted an overhaul of our immigration and transportation security systems, as well as the creation of the Department of Homeland Security. But our work is not done. We still have a lot to learn and adapt to.

Despite the reforms undertaken in the wake of 9/11, there are still gaps and weaknesses in our system. One of the attackers who killed 14 people in San Bernardino in 2015 legally entered into this country on a K-1 “fiancé” visa—raising questions on the level of scrutiny given to visa applications. There are also remaining gaps in vetting and screening of VWP applicants, and in information sharing with other countries, which are both vital in the fight against the terrorist diaspora.

I look forward to hearing from our expert witnesses on what the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of State are doing to ensure that visa and VWP applicants are receiving sufficient screening and vetting before they are allowed to enter into this country. I thank the witnesses for being here and for their service—as well as the many men and women who serve our nation at both DHS and the State Department.

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