



## HOMELAND SECURITY COMMITTEE

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

“The Terrorist Diaspora: After the Fall of the Caliphate”  
July 13, 2017

Remarks as Prepared

Reports from the Middle East’s conflict zones contain the positive news of U.S. and allied forces’ successes in Syria and Iraq. In the past week, U.S.-backed forces in Syria have breached the wall around Raqqa’s Old City, marking a major advance in the months-long battle to drive the Islamic State out of its self-declared capital. In Iraq this week, Prime Minister Abadi arrived in Mosul to formally declare victory after Iraqi troops fought back a fierce resistance from the Islamic State, literally fighting meter by meter, to gain control of the city.

Looming over news of victory are questions about the road ahead. Today, jihadi fighters are fleeing to other towns, concealing themselves among locals, and joining affiliates in places like Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, Nigeria, and the Philippines. A New York Times correspondent reported from Mosul that the recovered bodies of ISIS fighters are primarily from the Caucasus, leaving locals to believe that Iraqi fighters have been shaving their beards, blending into the population, and fleeing with groups of refugees. Nor is the fighting over. ISIS still retains much of Al Anbar Province in Iraq and the Euphrates River valley in Syria. When I left Al Anbar in 2008, the neighborhoods were safe enough to walk around without body armor. My unit and I were fortunate enough to hand out soccer balls and school supplies to Iraqi children who were starting school and finally living in a safer area and free from terror. Within seven years, that province was under ISIS’ control.

Western Europe, with its access to the United States, has been a particularly concerning source of foreign fighters. Secretary Kelly recently described as many as 10,000 European citizens that went to take part in the region’s sectarian struggle. While many of those who went to fight are now dead, there are numerous fighters now seeking to return home. The New York Times reported that between 100 and 250 ideologically driven foreigners are thought to have been smuggled into Europe between 2014 and mid-2016, nearly all through Turkey. These returning fighters pose a greater threat to the West than ever before. They have learned to make IEDs in many forms, deploy drones that can drop grenades, and engage in combat with a range of deadly weapons, including low-tech weaponry like vehicles. And they can use this knowledge to train a younger generation of Western citizens susceptible to radicalization.

Europe has had to bear the brunt of the so-called Caliphate’s collapse. Facing the return of these jihadists, Europe has increased its defenses in many ways, including through increased intelligence collection and sharing, more programs to vet and screen travelers, and enhanced border security.

The question is whether these improvements are enough in light of today’s grave threat. Authorities have not been able to identify all returnees, some of whom have sophisticated false documents. Patchwork

screening and inconsistent border checks have allowed jihadists to hatch plots and hide from police by moving between European states. Additionally, limited intelligence-sharing and unheeded warnings between the EU's member states allows plotters to slip through the nets of law enforcement.

This Task Force's primary concern is the degree to which jihadists threaten the Homeland. The United States also faces a threat from returning foreign fighters. Our Visa Waiver Program, which allows European citizens to travel to the U.S. without a visa and with less screening, does provide an opportunity for determined terrorists to exploit.

The U.S. and Europe's close relationship, based on a common history, shared values and dependent economies, means that we must ensure the safety of travel across the Atlantic without disturbing tourist and commercial activity. The solution lies in our ability to quickly and effectively vet and screen travelers, gain sufficient intelligence from our allies, and act on credible threats when identified.

This Task Force was established to determine the threat that jihadists and returning foreign fighters pose to the Homeland and our ability to meet that threat through the Department of Homeland Security's vetting and screening infrastructure.

I look forward to hearing from our expert witnesses on the current threat and commensurate U.S. defenses. I thank the witnesses for being here and for the research they are conducting at Foundation for Defense of Democracies, the Heritage Foundation, and the Rand Corporation, which has informed lawmakers and the executive branch on this critical topic.

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