

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Sheila Jackson Lee

Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security

“One Flight Away: An Examination of the Threat Posed by ISIS Terrorists with Western Passports”

September 10, 2014

I am pleased to join Chairman Miller in holding today’s hearing to discuss the Federal government’s efforts to identify foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq who may seek to travel to the U.S. to do our Nation harm. This hearing could not be more timely.

Like all Americans, I was horrified, outraged, and saddened by the beheadings of two American journalists – James Foley and Steven Sotloff – by ISIL terrorists in Syria. ISIL has used ruthless, brutal tactics to expand its control over areas of northwestern Iraq and northeastern Syria, threatening the security of both countries.

They have attacked, killed, kidnapped, and displaced thousands of religious and ethnic minorities in the region, including Christians and Yazidis. U.S. officials have warned that Syria-based terrorist extremists may also pose a direct threat to our homeland.

One concern is that foreign fighters holding western passports might travel to this country to carry out a terrorist attack. The total number of armed opposition fighters engaged with various groups in Syria, including ISIL, is estimated at between 75,000 and 110,000 persons. Of those, the U.S. government estimates 12,000 are foreign fighters.

Among these foreign fighters are estimated to be more than 1,000 individuals from Europe and over 100 from the U.S., with about a dozen Americans fighting with ISIL specifically. Many have expressed particular concern about western foreign fighters, because they hold passports from countries that participate in the Visa Waiver Program (VWP), which generally allows them to travel to the U.S. without obtaining a visa.

I want assurances today that these individuals have been appropriately watchlisted and placed on the No-Fly List, and would welcome the opportunity to discuss their status in more detail outside of this open setting if necessary. I would note, however, that while VWP travelers usually do not need a visa to visit this country, they are currently vetted both prior to departure and upon arrival in the U.S.

I expect we will discuss that process in more detail at this hearing. Similarly, some are concerned about U.S. citizens who travel to the fight and then seek to return to this country by air. I expect discussion today about what DHS and its Federal partners can do to address such situations, beyond adding individuals to the No Fly List, if and when the need arises.

Indeed, the Departments of Homeland Security and State play a vital role in disrupting terrorist travel to the U.S. This Subcommittee has previously examined U.S. visa security and passenger

prescreening programs, which are essential to addressing the foreign fighter threat to the homeland.

I hope our DHS and State Department witnesses can speak to us about how these programs operate and how they can be used to address concerns regarding VWP travel specifically. I also hope to hear from our State Department witness about how we are engaging with our foreign partners to help address information gaps regarding individuals of concern and their travel patterns. While the U.S. cannot resolve the larger situation in Syria and Iraq, we have a responsibility to protect the homeland from threats from ISIL and similar terrorist organizations.

I therefore strongly encourage the Administration and Congressional Leadership to ensure that all relevant committees, including Intelligence, Armed Services, and Homeland Security, are included in briefings on this matter, so we can work cooperatively to address the various threats posed by ISIL to the U.S., both around the world and here in the homeland.

Finally, I look forward to the President's address to the Nation tonight as he outlines his plan for combating ISIL. I remain committed to working with my colleagues on this Committee and across Congress to help keep America secure.