

OPENING STATEMENT OF RANKING MEMBER BRIAN HIGGINS (D-NY)

Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence

“Jihadist Safe Havens: Efforts to Detect and Deter Terrorist Travel”

July 24, 2014

This hearing is a timely and necessary follow-up to our hearing last May regarding Al-Qaeda operations in both Iran and Syria. I would also like to thank the witnesses for appearing to testify as we expand our understanding about travel patterns of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq and how they continue to impact on the U.S. homeland.

U.S. intelligence officials report that at least 7,000 fighters from more than 50 countries across the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, Asia, including dozens of volunteers from the United States have traveled to Syria to support armed opposition groups there. Other estimates by non-government sources suggest that over 10,000 pro-opposition foreign fighters have travelled to Syria. Overall, U.S. government estimates place the strength of armed opposition forces - including foreign fighters - between 75,000 and 110,000 persons.

Some of these opposition groups are U.S.-designated terrorist organizations, and a subset of dedicated extremist fighters may pose an outsized threat. Thousands of other non-Syrian fighters reportedly are fighting in Syria to support the government of Bashar al Assad, including members of Lebanese Hezbollah, the Iranian military, and Iraqi Shia militias.

Foreign fighters contribute to the persistence of the armed conflict in Syria and may also pose external security risks now or in the near future. To date, the FBI has arrested a handful of U.S. citizens and residents on charges of providing material support to terrorist groups and using certain weapons in connection with the conflict in Syria.

Officials in European and Asian governments have also made several arrests of would-be foreign fighters, returned foreign fighters, or their recruiters and facilitators. It is imperative that U.S. focus not only on U.S. persons traveling to and from Syria, but also persons traveling to and from our neighboring countries as well.

On April 22, 2013, the Canadian Police announced the arrest of two people in connection with plotting a terrorist attack on a passenger train that travels from Toronto, through Niagara Falls, New York, into New York City. According to Canadian officials, the alleged terrorists were receiving assistance from Al Qaeda elements in Iran.

Last year's plot in Canada raises questions both about whether Al Qaeda operatives in Iran and Syria have access to a broader terror network, and whether Canada is a target for terrorist activity or recruitment.

Today, in addition to their testimony on the larger issues of foreign fighters, I would like our witnesses to provide information on foreign fighter transit in Canada, and the potential for these individuals, to enter the U.S. via Canada after returning from Syria or Iraq.