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Islamist Extremism in Europe

Ambassador Henry A. Crumpton, Coordinator for Counterterrorism

Testimony before the Subcommittee on European Affairs of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee

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Chairman Allen, Senator Biden, Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee: thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I will summarize my formal written statement and ask that you include my full testimony in the record.

It is now well known that the terrorist cell that conducted the 9-11 attacks did much of its planning from a base in Europe. Five years later, and despite many counterterrorism successes, violent Islamist extremism in Europe continues to pose a threat to the national security of the United States and our allies.

At the global level, Al Qa'ida (AQ) still seeks to attack the United States, and despite suffering enormous damage since 2001, still retains a capability to do so. But, increasingly, the threat comes from smaller, more diffuse, locally-based groups that are not under AQ command, but rather share its vision of a global war against the civilized world, especially against those Muslims who embrace a vision of tolerance and interconfessional harmony. In Europe, this threat manifests itself in a variety of ways: direct attacks like those in Madrid and London; recruitment of terrorists and foreign fighters for Iraq; and ideological safe havens in immigrant communities isolated from mainstream society. In addition, as our collective efforts in Iraq and that region constrain the mobility of foreign fighters into Iraq, enemy recruits may seek other areas in which to gather and operate. Europe is a potential target.

Assistant Secretary Fried has provided an excellent overview of Islamist extremism in Europe, the conditions that allow it to develop, and some of our efforts to counter these conditions. I would like to provide some additional information on our efforts and the challenges we face in doing so.

To be successful we will need to address both the immediate, direct threat posed by terrorism today, and the long-term potential for growth in extremism.

The immediate threat is clear and in some ways easier to address: specific persons or groups seeking to launch attacks on specific targets. Those people must be captured, killed or deterred, and their attacks prevented, almost always in concert with our partners. But at the same time as we and our partners work to protect and defend our homelands and to attack the terrorists'

ability to operate, we must also counter the ideologies that support violent extremism.

Dealing with the threat from violent extremism, therefore, requires that we and our partners wage a traditional campaign using our judicial, law enforcement, financial, military, and diplomatic resources. Simultaneously, we must fight the enemy in the arena of ideas, ideas suffused with justice, integrity, and virtue. This challenge will resemble, in some ways, that which we faced during the Cold War. Countering violent extremism involves a world-wide effort. It will last decades, if not longer. And this ideological conflict—halting the spread of al-Qa'ida's perverted world view—will be at the heart of this challenge.

How do we prepare for this challenge? We need to counter the terrorist network by building alternative networks. All human beings belong to networks. They create bonds of shared experience and trust, and support their needs. Disrupting enemy networks in the war on terrorism is an essential activity, but it can only take us part way to success. We must also work with our partners to find alternative ways to meet people's social and economic needs and prevent them from gravitating toward extremist networks.

To do this, we and our partners need each other's help, and we will need each other's trust more than ever. Trust, rooted in understanding, promotes information sharing and collective strategies. In the operational context, trust stimulates speed, agility, stealth, and collective strength. We must understand the enemy networks, their tactics and the space in which we confront them so that we may determine practical countermeasures. We must also understand ourselves and each other. Based on this knowledge, we can forge powerful networks of trust that help us out-think, out-maneuver, and out-fight the terrorists.

As we seek to do this in Europe, we begin with a major advantage. Decades of close transatlantic collaboration have created powerful institutions, where the impulse for close cooperation is deep-rooted: NATO, the EU, and the G8. These bodies serve in different ways to help us address the challenge of Islamist extremism. They already institutionalize the habits of trust and cooperation that need to underpin our common effort against the enemy. Moreover, they bring to bear all the instruments of national and trans-national power — diplomatic, informational, military, economic, legal, intelligence — and, better yet, serve as force multipliers.

Although we begin with this advantage in Europe, we also need to build and bolster partnerships and trusted networks to achieve our aims. In the eight months since I have been Ambassador for Counterterrorism, we have held a series of high-level CT discussions with the UK, one of our closest allies. I just returned last Friday from our most recent interagency session. Another set of talks is underway with France, an effective, tough CT partner. I will lead an interagency delegation to Paris in May. These discussions are not mere "consultations." On the contrary, these exchanges lead to programs and operations, maximizing our collective abilities to hurt the enemy.

With the British for example, we have advanced cooperative efforts to address terrorist use of the Internet and have collaborated to counter the extremists' message. We also cooperate well beyond the borders of Europe. In Iraq and elsewhere, our teamwork with British and Canadian partners has secured the release of our hostages. The French, working with us, have provided training to judges in Indonesia, which follows French legal practices. Through a bilateral counterterrorism working group, I have engaged with my Russian counterpart to consider ways to counter the influence of extremist ideology. We met most recently in late February and we will meet again in June. In the G8, moving beyond the long-standing and effective program of CT cooperation through the CTAG (Counterterrorism Action Group), we have been working with partners on projects aimed at addressing terrorist recruitment in prisons and developing common policies that reach out to the moderate voices and leaders in Muslim communities around the globe. In addition, we are supporting the Russian-led G8 initiative to find new ways to enlist the private sector in counterterrorism projects through the development of public/private sector partnerships.

We have made progress — but there is much more required. Our European partners must also take the lead in their own countries. They need to find ways to build trusted networks of their own that isolate and marginalize terrorists and their supporters, galvanize revulsion against the murder of innocents, and empower legitimate alternatives to extremism. This element

of trust will play a key role as European governments seek to mobilize mainstream members of at-risk communities to counter the extremists and their message.

Clearly, the Europeans abhor and condemn terrorism and violence. But moving from condemnation of terrorism to active cooperation with authorities to bring perpetrators to justice requires a new level of trust. This underscores a critical point: the struggle against extremism in Europe is not just the "destructive" task of eradicating enemy networks, but also the "constructive" task of working to build trust and confidence in governments' commitment to fairness and opportunity for all their citizens. This creates interdependent networks that can offer communities legitimate alternatives to the twisted perspectives and false solutions exposed by extremists.

As in the Cold War, we and our partners will need to engage in an ideological struggle, a battle to undermine the philosophical basis for violent extremism. As the international community continues to pursue specific organizational remedies, using our legal systems, intelligence services and security forces, we must simultaneously develop a strategy to de-legitimize terrorism. Our European partners must do more to encourage all their citizens to identify with the societies in which they live. This will not be easy. But, we must do a better than we are doing now.

Our European partners understand the gravity of the threat. The Madrid and London bombings, the van Gogh murder in the Netherlands, the cartoon riots, all have served to reinforce the need to confront and overcome violent Islamist extremism. Many European governments are rooting out terrorist networks and support systems. Spain continues to disrupt extremist cells on a regular basis, detaining and convicting dozens of suspects in the last two years. France recently broke up a network recruiting foreign fighters for Iraq, and just last month put on trial suspects from an alleged terrorist network connected to militants in Chechnya and Afghanistan. The Netherlands, using new and tougher counterterrorism legislation, recently convicted members of the Hofstad Group.

But despite this shared perception of the threat, there is disagreement over the most effective means to counter the threat. Some Europeans continue to argue that terrorism is merely – or mainly – a criminal problem. In the last year, there has been a raging controversy in Europe about specific counterterrorism practices allegedly used by the United States. This is a serious issue deserving serious consideration lest it undermine the trust that is essential to our effort. To succeed in applying our vast power against the enemy, we must calibrate and focus that power, so that our actions are legitimate and, importantly, perceived as legitimate.

We are engaging on all these issues with our European partners. Secretary Rice and Legal Adviser Bellinger have met with European leaders and officials and laid out clearly our policies and practices. As we move forward in our dialogue, our European friends need to know that the United States understands that these are difficult questions and that differences remain. We recognize the need to address the perception gaps and the need to explain our actions. This point is critical. In our global, high-tech, media-saturated society, perception and misperception affect legitimacy. Legitimacy or lack thereof, in turn, enhances or degrades power, respectively. This is unprecedented, in terms of scope, speed, and impact. And, this is yet another fundamental shift in the nature of war. We must work with our European partners to understand this.

We view the enemy on this global battlefield as a "threat complex" comprising three strategic elements: leaders, safe havens and underlying conditions. Given that the overall terrorist threat resembles an insurgency, we must develop a counterinsurgency strategy that incorporates all the tools of governance to attack the enemy, deny safe haven, and address the socio-economic and political needs of at-risk populations. Offensive tactical CT success buys us time and space to build the far more enduring, constructive programs needed to undercut extremists' ability to appeal to the disaffected. Moreover, this "threat complex" covers multiple, layered, and overlapping battlefields: global, regional, national, and local. Denying terrorists safe haven demands a regional response, given the transnational nature of the threat and of enemy safe haven. For this reason, building regional partnerships is the cornerstone of any enduring counterterrorism strategy.

Applying that analysis to Europe, we find that while no states in Europe allow terrorist leaders free reign or consciously provide facilities for terrorists, extremists can and do exploit free societies, with their respect for civil liberties and the rule of law, and their broad access to sophisticated technology, in order to create space in which they can recruit, plan and operate. This sort of safe haven is a problem of growing concern, and we are working with several European partners to devise means to deal with this challenge.

European allies must also contend with underlying conditions that terrorists may exploit: local groups, long-standing grievances, communal conflicts and societal structures provide fertile soil for the growth of extremism. The unrest in French suburbs some months ago and the cartoon-related violence around the world, while not directly connected to terrorism per se, could provide an opportunity for extremist recruiters.

Technology is eliminating the distance that once clearly separated us across land and sea. Safe havens in cyberspace and the ability to transfer funds, materiel and people depend on existing regional underground networks (such as those that exist for narcotics trafficking, piracy or people smuggling). Most terrorist safe havens sit astride national borders, in places like the Sulu Sea, the Northwest Frontier – and the Sahel. In Europe, the same ease of travel across national frontiers that has contributed to economic prosperity has also facilitated the movement of terrorists. Pressed by Algerian counterterrorism successes, the once Algeria-centric GSPC, for example, has become a regional terrorist organization, recruiting and operating all throughout the Mahgreb – and beyond to Europe itself. Al Qa'ida leaders may be isolated and under pressure, unable to communicate effectively, but this has not prevented regional groups from establishing independent networks among themselves. In some ways, this poses even more daunting intelligence collection and strategic policy challenges.

Much of the impetus for progress in our struggle against extremism must come from the field. Here, our ambassadors and their inter-agency country teams serve as essential sources of information, ideas, and implementation. The Ambassadors, as the President's field representatives, are uniquely placed to orchestrate all the instruments of statecraft. They alone can direct a Chief of Station, an FBI Legal Attaché, a USAID Director, a Defense Attaché, a DHS representative, and a Commercial Attaché to work in concert, to blend their collective efforts, to focus on the enemy and the conditions that the enemy exploits. Moreover, because of the transnational battlefield, the Ambassadors must work together in a regional context. Toward that end, we have initiated Ambassadorial-level conferences. We have convened conferences for the Southeast Asia and Iraq regions; more are coming. Through this effort, we are identifying regional CT challenges and recommending specific policies leading to specific multi-agency programs and operations. And while European posts are more accustomed to thinking regionally, we will be working with Assistant Secretary Fried to organize similar conferences in the Europe-Eurasia region, which we hope will generate similar results, so that regional networks of country teams, led by our Ambassadors, can more acutely shape and implement policy that corresponds to the shifting nature of the enemy and the battlefield. Networked warfare, using all our policy tools, demands accurate, fast, and agile responses. A regional, field orientation, intimately linked to foreign partners, and supported by Washington, enables both our understanding and our response. After all, vision or policy and implementation or operations are interdependent. And, they merge together best in the field, not inside the beltway.

In addition, we will need more innovative programs with non-state actors, like the Muslim Dialogue Conference held in Belgium by Ambassador Korologos, and a similar meeting planned for the Netherlands by Ambassador Arnall, to listen and learn, to communicate.

We and our allies must convince disaffected persons that there are alternatives to messages of hate, violence, and despair. Ultimately, we will defeat violent extremism by deploying our most powerful weapon: the ideals of prosperity, freedom and hope, and the values that we and our European partners represent in our democratic, just and open societies, and which we share with millions of others around the world. We are working to develop a comprehensive strategy to de-legitimize terrorism and to encourage the efforts of the overwhelming majority of Muslims who reject violent extremism. Reza Aslan, in his excellent book,

No god but God notes that it will take many years to defeat those "who have replaced Muhammad's original version of tolerance and unity with their own ideals of hatred and discord." But, he adds, that "the cleansing is inevitable, and the tide of reform cannot be stopped. The Islamic Reformation is already here." We and our partners must listen to these Muslim reformers, support their efforts, earn their trust, and continue to press for their and our vision of a better future for all our children.

The task will not be easy and success will take time. But if we are to avoid the nightmare of more Madrid and London-style attacks, we must not fail.

Mr. Chairman, that completes the formal part of my remarks and I welcome your questions or comments.

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