



**Prepared Opening Statement
Rep. Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)
Ranking Member, House Committee on Homeland Security**

Hearing: *The Rise of Radicalism: Growing Terrorist Sanctuaries and the Threat to the U.S. Homeland*

November 18, 2015

I stand with my colleagues in expressing my condolences and support for people of France. As Americans, we stand in solidarity with our French allies. The terrorist group ISIL has claimed responsibility for the attacks that were carried out last Friday in Paris. The attacks were a chilling manifestation of the reach of the ISIL terrorist network in Europe.

On Monday, President Obama announced a new bilateral agreement with France to share intelligence and operational military information more quickly and more often. This move will close information gaps that have existed with our European partners. The bipartisan task force organized by the Homeland Security cited this gap as a major finding in its recent report that examined the threat posed by foreign fighters. Consequently, we welcome enhanced information sharing with France.

It has been reported that a fake Syrian passport was found with one of the terrorists who carried out the deadly Paris attacks. Since 2011, Syria has been a country torn by civil war, with an estimated 4.2 million Syrians forced to flee from their homeland. While the United States is the largest donor of humanitarian aid to Syria, President Obama announced earlier this year that we would do more and work with the U.N. to provide shelter to 10,000 refugees who are in refugee camps, primarily in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon.

As we continue to discuss America's involvement with Syrian refugees, it is important that we as Federal policymakers embrace facts, not fear. The Syrian people are the primary victims of the violent conflict in Syria and the brutal actions of ISIL. They are the most vulnerable to the violence and know first-hand the cruelty the terrorists have brought to their communities.

Syrian refugees, like others who are given safe harbor in the U.S., are fleeing dire, even life-threatening, situations. The migrants who have fled and continue to flee to Western Europe will not be considered for protection in the United States, as they will seek protection in European countries.

The U.S. has the benefit of an ocean and time to separate us from the flood of humanity that Europe is struggling to manage. In stark contrast to what is occurring with migrants arriving in Europe, our government has the time to thoroughly screen refugees before they are admitted. Our extensive and deliberative vetting process takes, on average, between 18 and 24 months.

An individual seeking refugee status in the U.S. cannot step foot in the country until the Department of Homeland Security has made a determination of admissibility, having applied our Federal prioritization criteria and subjected the applicant to extensive biometric and biographic checks, multiple in-person interviews, and medical screenings.

While concern about the risks associated with unknown persons in refugee populations is understandable, particularly in the wake of last week's heinous attacks in Paris, we must not lose sight of the fact that three quarters of the refugee population are women and children, and the U.S. government will be highly selective about which applicants it approves.

Providing safe harbor to individuals who no longer have a home because of war and violence is the humane – and American - thing to do.

Furthermore, in our fervor to protect the country from threats, we must not turn a blind eye to the fact that there are people who would seek to do Americans harm and strike at our way of life who were born and raised here. Lone offenders have been reached not only by ISIL, but by Al Qaeda and Domestic Groups and have been inspired to commit domestic terrorism right here on US soil.

Furthermore, the downing of a Russian airliner on October 31 by ISIL brings into focus that the aviation sector remains a terrorist target and the importance of bolstering our screening procedures at last point of departure airports.

Finally, as we consider foreign terrorist threats to the homeland, we must not ignore the risks associated with the Visa Waiver Program. In fact, the Committee's bipartisan taskforce report acknowledged that while the Administration has improved the security of VWP, "continuous enhancements must be made to keep pace with changing terrorist tactics and to detect violent extremists before they board U.S.-bound planes."

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