

FINAL REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON COMBATING TERRORIST AND FOREIGN FIGHTER TRAVEL

Background

- In March 2015, the House Committee on Homeland Security created a bipartisan, Member-led Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel, charged with examining the threat from individuals who leave home to join jihadist groups overseas, especially in Syria and Iraq.
- Task Force Members and staff conducted dozens of official meetings, briefings, and site visits in the United States and overseas to assess the severity of the threat and to identify potential security gaps.
- The review was one of the most extensive public examinations of U.S. government efforts to counter terrorist travel since the 9/11 Commission's final report in 2004.
- The Task Force report presented 32 Key Findings and accompanying recommendations.

The Threat

- We are witnessing the largest global convergence of jihadists in history. Nearly 30,000 people from 100+ countries have travelled to the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq since 2011, including 4,500+ Westerners and 250+ Americans who have joined or attempted to join jihadist groups.
- Foreign fighters pose a triple threat: they strengthen terrorist groups, incite others back home to conduct attacks, and can return themselves to launch acts of terror.
- These jihadists are armed with combat experience and extremist connections and many are only a plane-flight away from our shores.
- Even if they do not return home to plot attacks, foreign fighters have taken the lead in recruiting a new generation of terrorists and are seeking to radicalize Westerners online to spread terror back home.

Overview of Key Findings

We are losing the struggle to stop Americans from traveling overseas to join jihadists, despite concerted efforts to stem the flow.

- Of the hundreds of Americans who have sought to travel to the battlefield in Syria and Iraq, authorities have failed to interdict the majority of them. Several dozen have also managed to make it back into America.
- The unprecedented speed at which Americans are being radicalized by violent Islamist extremists is straining federal law enforcement's ability to monitor and intercept suspects.
- Jihadist recruiters are increasingly using secure websites and apps to communicate with Americans, making it harder for law enforcement to disrupt plots and terrorist travel.
- "Broken travel" and other evasive transit tactics are making it harder to track foreign fighters.

We need to overhaul the U.S. strategy for combating terrorist travel.

- The U.S. government lacks a national strategy for combating terrorist travel and has not produced one in nearly a decade.
- The threat has changed greatly since then, and agencies need new guidance to make sure security measures keep pace with evolving terrorist tactics.

To catch foreign fighters, intelligence needs to be exchanged quickly, but at home and abroad we still face barriers to information sharing.

- There is currently no comprehensive global database of foreign fighters. Instead, countries including the United States rely on a patchwork system for swapping extremist identities, increasing the odds foreign fighters will slip through the cracks.
- Despite improvements since 9/11, some foreign partners are still sharing information with us about terrorist suspects in a manner which is ad hoc, intermittent, and often incomplete.
- U.S. federal authorities can do more to make sure state and local law enforcement have the information they need to assist with counterterrorism cases.

Since 9/11, America has gotten better at keeping terrorists out of the country, but we are doing far too little to keep Americans from leaving to train in terrorist safe havens.

- Few initiatives exist nationwide to raise awareness about foreign-fighter recruitment and to assist vulnerable communities with spotting warning signs.
- The federal government has failed to develop clear early-intervention strategies—or “off-ramps” to radicalization—to prevent suspects on law enforcement’s radar from leaving to fight with extremists.

Gaping security weaknesses overseas—especially in Europe—are putting the U.S. homeland in danger.

- Many countries do not even conduct basic counterterrorism checks on their own travelers, including screening them against terrorism watchlists or trying to identify fraudulent passports.
- Pervasive overseas security gaps make it easier for aspiring foreign fighters to travel to terrorist hotspots—and increase the odds that trained jihadists will be able to travel to America undetected.

Ultimately, tackling the foreign fighter threat depends on eliminating the problem at the source in Syria and Iraq and, in the long run, preventing the emergence of additional terrorist sanctuaries.

Chairman Michael McCaul
Ranking Member Bennie Thompson

Members of the Task Force

Republican Lead John Katko, *New York*

Democratic Lead Loretta Sanchez, *California*

Rep. Barry Loudermilk, *Georgia*

Rep. Filemon Vela, *Texas*

Rep. John Ratcliffe, *Texas*

Rep. Donald Payne, *New Jersey*

Rep. Will Hurd, *Texas*

Rep. Martha McSally, *Arizona*