

House Testimony

Radicalization in the U.S. and the Rise of Terrorism

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**Hearing before the
Subcommittee on National Security and the Subcommittee on Government Operations of
the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform**

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Chairman DeSantis, Chairman Meadows, Ranking Member Lynch, and Ranking Member Connolly, along with the distinguished members of both subcommittees, on behalf of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, it is an honor to appear before you to discuss today's important topic. There have sadly been far too many grim times like this one in recent months, where I have appeared before Congress in the wake of a deadly terrorist attack against a Western country.

This testimony will first argue that terrorism analysts and the media are mistaken to have the default assumption that relatively small-scale attacks have likely been carried out by “lone wolves”—an assumption that has been very clear in the wake of Omar Mateen's bloody attack. It then examines key trends in both lone wolf and networked terrorism.

Was Orlando an Act of Lone Wolf Terrorism?

Omar Mateen wanted the world to associate his attack at an Orlando nightclub, the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history, with ISIS, the self-proclaimed Islamic State. Mateen felt so strongly about this that he took time out of his rampage to call 911 and swear allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. For its own part, ISIS seems happy to associate itself with his attack. The ISIS-linked Amaq News Agency has described Mateen as a “fighter from the Islamic State.”

But should this be considered an “ISIS attack”? Mitchell D. Silber, the former director of intelligence analysis for the New York City Police Department, has crafted a framework for understanding the connection between terrorist attacks and transnational networks.¹ Though he designed the framework for ISIS's parent organization, al-Qaeda, it is equally applicable to ISIS. Silber places terrorist attacks' relationship to broader networks into three categories. The first category is attacks where the network exercises command and control. The second category is plots that a network suggests or endorses, but provides no specific guidance on “means, timing, and targets.” The third category, in which plotters are ideologically inspired by an organization but received no suggestions from its leadership, has the weakest connection to the network.

Over the past few years, there has been a systematic bias for analysts to place Western plots into this final category. Analysts have too often believed that plots were inspired by larger networks but otherwise unconnected to them.

As the intrepid journalist Rukmini Callimachi has documented in an extensive *New York Times* investigation, officials now believe that ISIS's powerful terrorist network in Europe could have been better understood long before the tragic attack that struck Paris in November.² She notes numerous plots in Europe—including the May 2014 shooting at the Brussels Jewish Museum and the attempted August 2015 attack on a train traveling from Amsterdam to Paris—where authorities quickly honed in on the idea that the attackers were “lone wolves.” In doing so, they missed important connections to the broader ISIS network.

¹ Mitchell D. Silber, *The al-Qaeda Factor: Plots Against the West* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

² Rukmini Callimachi, “How ISIS Built the Machinery of Terror Under Europe's Gaze,” *New York Times*, March 29, 2016.

This is why a discussion about lone wolf vs. networked terrorism is neither academic nor without consequence. Had European authorities doggedly searched for connections following these small-scale or failed plots, they would have had a better chance of preventing a tragedy of the magnitude of the Paris attacks, with 130 innocent lives lost.

Just as ISIS claiming an attack does not prove that its overall network played a strong role, lack of immediately obvious connections to the broader organization does not necessarily mean an attack is lone wolf in nature. Bearing in mind the open questions about Mateen's attack, this testimony now turns to discussion of both lone wolf and networked terrorism.

The State of Lone Wolf Terrorism

Lone wolf terrorism has been growing over time, and social media has dramatically accelerated this trend. Despite growing interest in lone wolf terrorism, there remains a dearth of academic work on the topic. This section draws heavily from Ramón Spaaij's volume, *Understanding Lone Wolf Terrorism: Global Patterns, Motivations and Prevention*, which provides an important quantitative look at lone wolf terrorism across fifteen Western countries.³

The database of lone wolf terrorists Spaaij draws from consists of 88 individuals who carried out a total of 198 attacks between 1968 and 2010. Spaaij's data reveals several key points that put the recent spike in lone wolf incidents into some perspective:

- **Lone wolf terrorism is increasing.** Because of the relatively small universe of data (an average of fewer than five lone wolf attacks per year), there have naturally been extreme fluctuations in the number of attacks from one year to another. However, such statistical anomalies are reduced if one examines this phenomenon from one decade to the next. Doing so reveals that, beginning in the 1970s, there has been a gradual yet observable increase in the United States and a much more rapid increase outside the United States. Spaaij notes that “between the 1970s and 2000s, the total number of lone wolf terrorist attacks per decade rose by 45% (from 22 to 32) in the United States and by a massive 412% (from 8 to 41) in the other 14 countries combined.” Despite this observable increase, the overall number of lone wolf attacks remained relatively low at the time of Spaaij's writing. During the entire period Spaaij examined, the average number of lone wolf attacks per year was 4.7. Given the trend toward increased lone wolf terrorism over time, the annual average of lone wolf attacks by the 2000s had reached 7.3.
- **Lone wolf attacks are harder to stop, but tend to be less deadly, than those planned and executed by groups.** Many commentators have noted how difficult it is to prevent lone wolf terrorist attacks. This is true: A group involved in a terrorist plot can be charged with terrorist conspiracy even if all the overt actions they had taken in preparation of the attack would otherwise be legal. In contrast, an individual cannot, by definition, conspire with himself. As a result, even if authorities know that an individual poses a danger, it may be difficult or impossible to stop him from carrying out a lone wolf attack. Though lone wolf terrorists have an advantage in avoiding the disruption of their plots by authorities, their attacks tend to be less lethal than those of multiple attackers. Spaaij notes that while

³ Ramón Spaaij, *Understanding Lone Wolf Terrorism: Global Patterns, Motivations and Prevention* (Springer, 2012).

lone wolf terrorism averaged 0.62 deaths per incident during the period he examined, all terrorist attacks in the countries studies averaged 1.6 deaths per incident.

- **Lone wolf attackers are inspired by diverse ideologies, but jihadist motivations are increasing.** Spaaij analyzes the lone wolf attackers he studied by motive as motivated by right-wing extremism/white supremacy in 17% of cases, Islamism in 15% of cases, anti-abortion sentiments in 8% of cases, and nationalism or separatist goals in 7% of cases. Of these, he notes that the recent trend had been toward an increasing number of attackers with Islamist motivations. Part of the reason for this increase in Islamist-inspired lone wolf attacks may be the general increase in Islamist terrorism; and Spaaij further notes that these attackers may have been responding in part “to the call by al-Qaeda ideologues for individual jihad.” Spaaij’s book was written before ISIS left the al-Qaeda network, but ISIS has not only made similar calls, but also found an audience that proved more ready to act.
- **Lone wolves are more likely than other terrorists to be mentally ill.** Mental illness is not a compelling root-cause explanation for terrorism: As Marc Sageman has noted, terrorists’ mental health tends to be “surprisingly normal.”⁴ However, Spaaij writes that lone wolves “tend to have a greater propensity to suffer mental health issues” than do individuals involved in group terrorism. He concedes that it is difficult to analyze the mental health of lone wolves with precision, but describes these lone actors as “relatively likely to suffer from some form of personality disorder.” Indeed, Spaaij provides five case studies of lone wolves’ mental state, and four of the five examined were diagnosed with personality disorders; four of the five also seemingly suffered from depression. Spaaij’s findings are consistent with other academic treatments of lone wolf terrorism and mental illness.

Spaaij notes that the growth of lone wolf terrorism over time may in part be attributable to “the increased prevalence of the Internet as a vehicle through which to disseminate extreme ideologies.” The Internet is a powerful medium that has changed the impact of communications in multiple ways, and social media is inarguably an important part of the increasing prevalence of lone wolf terrorism. I have previously argued that we need to be more innovative in our strategic communication efforts.⁵ The increasing ability of militant groups to mobilize people to carry out acts of lone wolf terrorism is one reason for the importance of these efforts. In that regard, particularly promising options are:

- the creation of small, debureaucratized communications cells that essentially serve as start-up companies within the broader structure of government;
- targeted interventions against individuals who pose a clear radicalization risk, but who are determined to be prone to counter-radicalization efforts prior to carrying out acts of violence;

⁴ Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

⁵ See, for example, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, written testimony submitted for “Jihad 2.0: Social Media and the Next Evolution of Terrorist Recruitment,” hearing before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs, May 7, 2015.

- the use of cutting-edge tools in service of targeted intervention efforts, such as the coupling of personality profiling with big data capabilities (to determine on whom counter-radicalization might be best targeted, and which counter-radicalization approach is most likely to be effective);
- partnership and engagement with private industry, including tech firms.

The State of Networked Terrorism

But it is possible that Mateen, rather than being a lone wolf, was much more connected to a jihadist network than analysts currently believe. Currently networked terrorism is a far more powerful threat to Western countries than it has been in years, due to both a rise in mobilization to violence (driven by such factors as the rise of ISIS and its various innovations, and the Syria conflict and the flow of foreign fighters to that theater) as well as a remarkable improvement in terrorist tradecraft due to numerous factors, including the explosion in end-to-end encryption. This section first looks at the network that recently carried out the Paris and Brussels attacks as an example of how networks function in 2016, and then turns to domestic networks in the United States.

The recent attacks in Paris and Brussels represent a watershed moment not just for ISIS, but for the entire jihadist movement. The attacks mark the first time that a single jihadist network succeeded in carrying out two separate mass casualty attacks in Europe. In the past, when jihadist networks struck in Europe, they were pursued with the full weight of European security and intelligence services, and all relevant perpetrators were neutralized before they could mount a second attack.

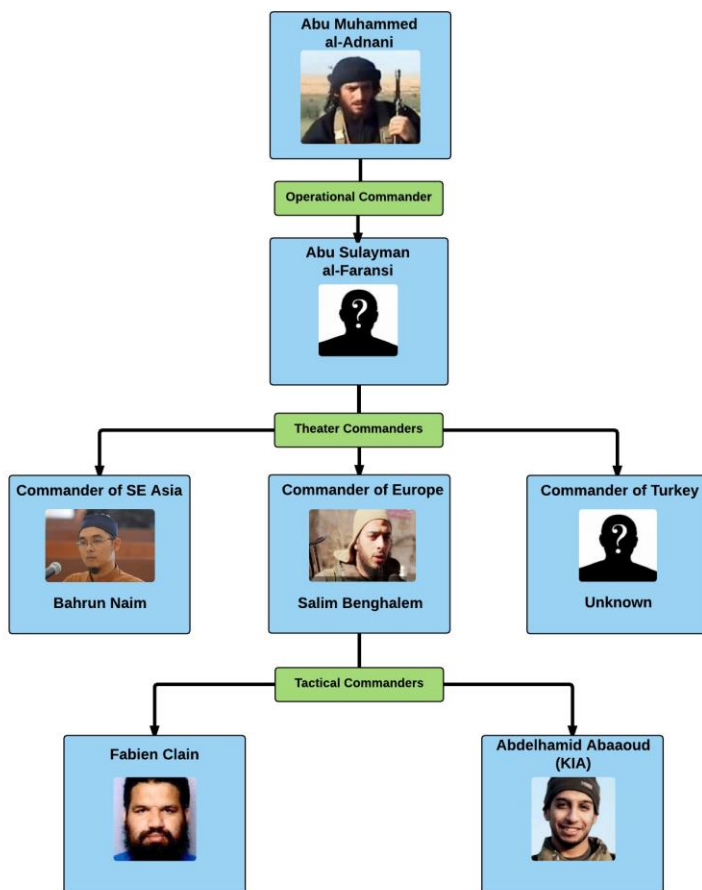
ISIS's successes are the result of a complex strategy executed by officials in the Amn al-Kharji, a shadowy wing of IS's bureaucracy responsible for selecting and training external operatives and for planning terrorist attacks in areas outside of ISIS's core territory, including those within European borders. Although ISIS's attacks and plots in Europe have received a great deal of media attention, the Amn al-Kharji has largely stayed out of the spotlight. This aversion to publicity is deliberate, and demonstrates the Amn al-Kharji's strategic importance to ISIS. While ISIS's military branches in Syria and Iraq readily advertise their exploits, the Amn al-Kharji is shrouded in secrecy, sometimes employing disinformation to mislead intelligence agencies. Nonetheless, enough information now has emerged in open-source reporting to paint a picture—however incomplete—of the Amn al-Kharji.

The most detailed information on the Amn al-Kharji comes from an interview given by an ISIS defector, known only as “Abu Khaled.”⁶ According to Abu Khaled, the Amn al-Kharji is one of four agencies that fall under ISIS's amniyat, or security apparatus. The other three agencies are the Amn al-Dawla, which is responsible for internal security within ISIS's territory; the Amn al-Dakhili, which is akin to an interior ministry; and the Amn al-Askari, or the military intelligence wing. Abu Khaled, a former member of the Amn al-Dawla, explained that the Amn al-Kharji was responsible for conducting espionage and terrorist attacks in enemy territory, and that the agency had developed intricate tactics enabling its operatives' infiltration. Indeed, long before the Amn al-Kharji put its attack plans for Brussels and Paris into motion, the branch spearheaded operations

⁶ Michael Weiss, “Confessions of an ISIS Spy,” *Daily Beast*, 2015.

behind enemy lines in Syria and Iraq. By the time IS began investing serious resources in European operations, the Amn al-Kharji had already refined its tradecraft for attacks outside ISIS-controlled territory.

Abu Khaled’s testimony sheds light on key players within the Amn al-Kharji’s opaque structure. According to Abu Khaled, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, ISIS’s chief spokesman and one of the organization’s top officials, appoints the commanders of each of the amniyat’s four branches. Other reports have also identified the Syria-born Adnani as the operational commander of the Amn al-Kharji. However, given Adnani’s role in managing multiple agencies within ISIS, it is highly likely that his position in the Amn al-Kharji is largely bureaucratic. That is, Adnani likely signs off on external operations, but is not involved in operational planning.



Rather, responsibility for directing ISIS’s external operations falls to an elusive figure known only by his *kunya* (nom de guerre), Abu Sulayman al-Faransi. Despite his prominent role in ISIS, little personal information about al-Faransi is available. It is believed that—as his *kunya* suggests—Faransi is a French national. According to French sources, he now resides in northern Syria with his wife—also a French national—and two children. Reports allege that al-Faransi was promoted to external operations chief following the Paris attacks, suggesting that the Frenchman was rewarded for overseeing one of ISIS’s most high-profile attacks. Al-Faransi’s name also surfaced in investigations into the Brussels attacks. Belgian authorities investigating the contents of a computer owned by Ibrahim El Bakraoui, one of the two suicide bombers who struck the Zaventem airport, concluded that Bakraoui had been in contact with

al-Faransi, and that other cell members may have been, as well. Bakraoui had submitted attack plans to the Frenchman.

Below al-Faransi in the Amn al-Kharji are the theater commanders, responsible for planning operations in various regions that ISIS wants to target. Theater commanders are perhaps the most pivotal actors in ISIS’s external operations structure, as they serve as a bridge between strategic planners and tactical operators. Several individuals have emerged as possible theater

commanders—though it is not clear how many such positions exist within the Amn al-Kharji—and it appears that ISIS appoints theater commanders who originate from the regions over which they are given authority.

For instance, ISIS's external operations in Southeast Asia are likely led by Bahrin Naim, an Indonesian militant now based in Syria who was responsible for coordinating the January 2016 attacks in Jakarta. ISIS has also likely appointed theater commanders for external operations in both Turkey and North Africa.

The theater commander for Europe is believed to be Salim Benghalem, another French national whose involvement in jihadism predates ISIS's emergence. Benghalem became radicalized in a French prison when serving an earlier sentence for attempted murder. He soon fell in with a network commonly known as the Buttes-Chaumont group, a Paris-based jihadist network involved in recruiting individuals to fight against U.S. forces in Iraq in the mid-2000s. This group also included Cherif and Said Kouachi, the brothers who carried out the Charlie Hebdo massacre in January 2015. In 2011, Benghalem and Cherif Kouachi traveled to Yemen, where they received training from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

Soon after traveling to Syria to join ISIS in early 2013, Benghalem was tapped to serve as a prison guard for several French hostages whom ISIS had kidnapped. Several former prison guards from this group have emerged as key actors in ISIS's European external operations efforts. For instance, Mehdi Nemmouche, a fellow French national who guarded French hostages alongside Benghalem, returned to Europe and carried out an attack on the Brussels Jewish Museum in May 2014 that killed four. Naajim Laachraoui, a Belgian national who served as one of the suicide bombers at the Zaventem airport, had also been a guard. Benghalem now outranks all of his former prison guard colleagues.

As the theater commander for ISIS's European operations, Benghalem oversees several commanders responsible for training operatives, and planning and coordinating operations at the ground level. These tactical commanders play a hands-on role in ISIS's Europe operations, and sometimes even participate in attacks themselves. Given their more public role, these commanders often attract greater media scrutiny than their more discrete superiors. Such was the case for Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who was killed by French authorities several days after the Paris attacks. In January 2015, Abaaoud deployed to Athens, where he directed a cell based in the Belgian city of Verviers that was disrupted when Belgian authorities intercepted telephone calls between Abaaoud and the plotters.

Between the Verviers plot and the Paris attacks, Abaaoud spent his time training operatives and planning unsophisticated, low-cost operations in Europe. In the summer of 2015, Abaaoud trained Paris native Reda Hame and at least one other operative to carry out mass casualty attacks on soft targets in France and Spain. This plan was disrupted when authorities arrested Hame's counterpart in Spain. Abaaoud was also in contact with Ayoub El Khazzani, who was tackled by passengers when he tried to open fire during an August 2015 train ride from Amsterdam to Paris. Khazzani never traveled to Syria, suggesting that, in addition to training operatives already in ISIS-controlled territory, Abbaoud sought to inspire radicalized individuals based in Europe to carry out attacks on their own.

These small-scale plots distracted authorities, who, as I warned in the first part of this testimony, *never looked beyond the lone-wolf paradigm to find the terrorist networks of which the plotters were a part*. All the while, Abaaoud was planning the Paris attacks, his jihadist magnum opus. In a move uncharacteristic of a commander of his stature, Abaaoud traveled to Paris to oversee and coordinate the operation personally. Though there is little information on Abaaoud's activities in Europe in the months and weeks before the Paris attacks, multiple news outlets reported that he traveled to the United Kingdom in the summer of 2015, possibly to case potential targets or to coordinate with other militants. Abaaoud then personally coordinated and participated in the Paris operations, dropping off one of the suicide bombers, opening fire on civilians in several different locations, and later driving to an area near the Bataclan and contacting militants inside the concert hall. Unlike the Verviers plot, Abaaoud was committed to personally seeing the Paris attacks through to completion.

Abaaoud planned additional attacks after the Paris massacre, but French authorities caught and killed him in a raid on an apartment in a Paris suburb. Though Abaaoud's death eliminated one of ISIS's most skilled external operatives, it is believed that ISIS quickly replaced him with Fabien Clain, a French convert whose voice was featured in the audio message in which ISIS claimed responsibility for the Paris attacks.

A look at the networks involved in the Paris and Brussels attacks provides further evidence of the sophistication of ISIS's external operations, and some indication of how jihadist networks will look in the United States (though U.S. networks will not be as sprawling, and are likely to be somewhat less interlinked). ISIS utilized a networked approach in executing the two attacks. That is, the group built a vast network in Europe to prepare for the Paris attacks, with some militants serving in an operational capacity while others played a support and logistics role. That ISIS was able to sustain such a vast support infrastructure in Europe is itself striking, considering the challenges of evading European intelligence agencies. Even more remarkable is the fact that ISIS was able to keep its support network largely intact following the Paris attacks, and subsequently mobilize this network to strike again in Brussels just months later amid a heightened security atmosphere in Europe. This feat reflects both the magnitude of ISIS's European network and the quality of its tradecraft.

Zerkani Network

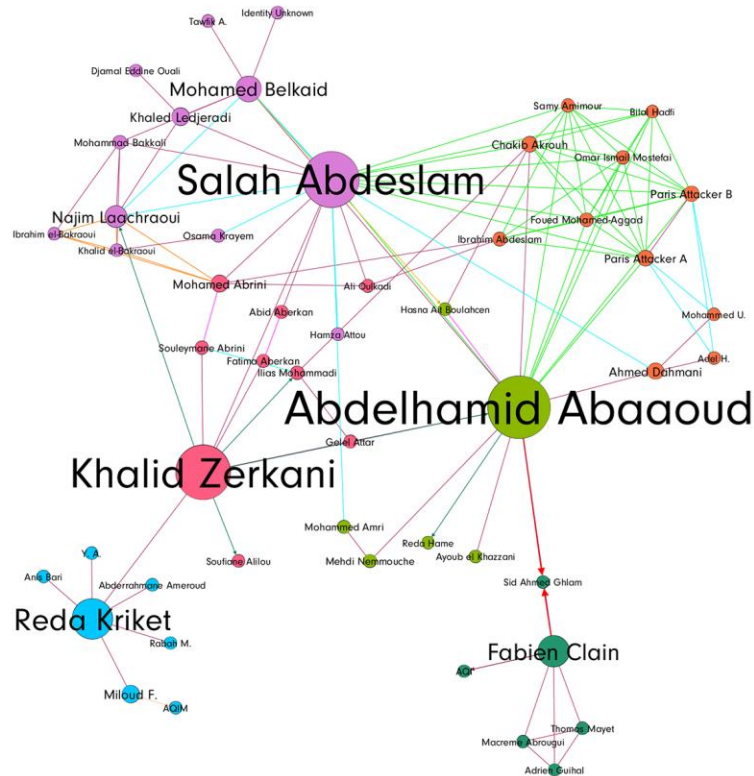
This graph represents connections between groups of Islamic extremists in Europe. The size of the node reflects its measure of betweenness centrality, or how frequently that node bridges the shortest distance between other nodes.

The node color uses modularity to attempt to determine distinct communities.

The edge color reflects the relationship between extremists.

Edge Legend

- Associate of
- Paris Attacker
- Brussels Attacker
- Recruiter of
- Traveled With
- Family Relationship
- Commander of
- Funded
- Supporter of
- Recruiter for



The graphic above reveals the scope of the networks involved in the Paris and Brussels attacks. Abaaoud sits at the center of the network, attesting to his role as the overall coordinator of the Paris attacks. Another key actor is Khalid Zerkani, an integral jihadist player in the Brussels neighborhood of Molenbeek, a hotbed of militancy that has served as a safe haven for ISIS operatives. Though Zerkani—who has been sentenced to 15 years in prison for his role as a jihadist recruiter—was not involved in either the Paris or Brussels attacks, the foreign fighter recruitment networks he established from 2012 to 2014 have been at the center of ISIS’s ongoing operations in Europe. Several key individuals involved in the Paris and Brussels attacks, including Abaaoud, Naajim Laachraoui and Salah Abdeslam, are directly linked to Zerkani, as was Reda Kriket, who had amassed an “unprecedented” weapons arsenal and was in the final stages of operational planning when French authorities arrested him shortly after the Brussels attacks.

ISIS operatives in Europe linked with Zerkani have also relied on other members of the Zerkani network as they sought to evade European authorities and plan future attacks. After the Paris attacks, Salah Abdeslam contacted Abid Aberkan, the nephew of Fatima Aberkan, who has been described as the “mother” of the Zerkani network. Abdeslam hid at the house of Aberkan’s mother, where he was eventually discovered and arrested.

The graphic also reveals the extensive overlap between the Paris and Brussels attack networks. Key individuals involved in providing logistical support for the Paris attacks rapidly transitioned to an operational role in Brussels. For instance, Naajim Laachraoui helped construct explosives for the Paris attacks before donning his own suicide vest in Brussels. Mohamed Belkaid, who was believed to have been in contact with several of the Paris attackers via phone, housed Salah Abdeslam while Abdeslam was on the run from Belgian authorities. Belkaid was likely involved

in planning attacks with Abdeslam when Belkaid was killed by Belgian forces in a raid several days before the Brussels attacks. Mohamed Abrini is yet another individual who played a support role in Paris before mobilizing in Brussels; he rented an apartment that was used by several Paris attackers and later tried to plant a bomb at the Zaventem airport, though he failed to detonate his explosives. This pattern suggests that ISIS's strategy in Europe involves building dual-purpose cells that can be converted from a support to attack role in order to maximize the utility of its network.

The U.S. has also had domestic terrorist networks in recent years, though they are not as robust as the European networks. For example, indictments and other publicly-available sources of information reveal a remarkably dense ISIS network clustered around the Minneapolis-St. Paul area. Almost every actor in this network is linked with one another.

As we talk about lone wolf terrorism, let's not lose sight of the role that networks will continue to play, especially in this age of improved tradecraft.

Thank you again for inviting me to testify today. I look forward to answering your questions.

Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Witness Disclosure Requirement – “Truth in Testimony”
Required by House Rule XI, Clause 2(g)(5)

Name: Daveed Garstein-
Boss

1. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants or subcontracts) you have received since October 1, 2012. Include the source and amount of each grant or contract.

2. Please list any entity you are testifying on behalf of and briefly describe your relationship with these entities.

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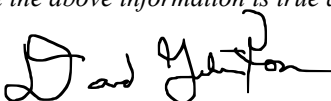
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I certify that the above information is true and correct.

Signature:



Date: June 21, 2016

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Daveed Gartenstein-Ross is a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and is the chief executive officer of Valens Global, a D.C.-based consulting firm that focuses on analyzing and crafting responses to the challenges posed by violent non-state actors (VNSAs). He is also an adjunct assistant professor in Georgetown University's security studies program, and a lecturer at the Catholic University of America. Gartenstein-Ross is the author or volume editor of seventeen books and monographs, and has published widely in the academic and popular press. He frequently conducts field research in relevant regions, including North Africa and South Asia.

Gartenstein-Ross frequently consults for clients who need to understand VNSAs and twenty-first century conflict. His client work has included advising the U.S. Department of Defense and Dutch ministry of foreign affairs on the crisis in North Africa, participating in live hostage negotiations in the Middle East, conducting risk assessments for oil and gas companies, undertaking border security work in Europe, and developing both stories and series for major media companies. He regularly lectures for the U.S. Department of Defense's Leader Development and Education for Sustained Peace (LDESP) program, and has designed and led training for the U.S. State Department's Office of Anti-Terrorism Assistance.

Gartenstein-Ross has taught or been on faculty at a number of major academic institutions, including the Catholic University of America, the University of Maryland, and the University of Southern California. He holds a Ph.D. in world politics from the Catholic University of America and a J.D. from the New York University School of Law. Gartenstein-Ross can conduct research in five languages.