

Opening Statement
Ranking Member Stephen Lynch (MA-08)
Subcommittee on National Security
Joint Hearing on “Terrorism and the Visa Waiver Program”
December 10, 2015

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I’d like to thank you for holding this hearing to examine the Visa Waiver Program. I’d also like to thank our witnesses for helping this Committee with its work.

As recently noted by William McCants of the Brookings Institution and author of *“The ISIS Apocalypse,”* the horrific terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13th evidenced a marked shift in strategy by I.S.I.L. – also known as Daesh. By perpetrating a series of centrally-planned and coordinated terrorist attacks against civilian targets in the West, Daesh has *“crossed some kind of Rubicon and definitely shifted in their thinking about targeting their enemies.”*

This shift in strategy is even more concerning given the continued terrorist threat posed by foreign fighters returning from Iraq and Syria. According to the bipartisan report on foreign fighters released by the House Homeland Security Committee in September of this year, approximately 10% of so-called “returnees” seek to engage in terrorist activity and recruitment upon their return from conflict zones. This statistic took form in the United States in 2015 with the arrest of several American returnees on terrorism-related charges. These dangers are exponentially greater given Daesh’s widespread use of social media as a global recruitment and radicalization tool.

Daesh has more than demonstrated its savagery and willingness to expand its terrorist activities beyond its controlled territories in Iraq and Syria and it is imperative that we continue to work together and take effective steps to enhance our national security against the threat of a homegrown terrorist attack. Of course just last week, we witnessed the tragic mass shooting in San Bernardino, California – the most devastating terrorist attack on U.S. soil since September 11th and one that Daesh has since praised in its daily online broadcasts.

One area where we have found significant bipartisan agreement is the subject of today’s hearing – the Visa Waiver Program administered by the Department of Homeland Security in consultation with the State Department.

Beginning in 1986 during the Reagan Administration, the Visa Waiver Program has allowed foreign citizens from specified countries to enter the United States for the purpose of business or tourism for up to 90 days without a visa. The program reflects a security partnership between the U.S. and 38 participating countries by establishing minimum standards for acceptable travel documents, including machine-readable passports, and information-sharing on lost or stolen passports via Interpol. **The Visa Waiver Program has also served to promote commerce and tourism in the United States. According to the Department of Homeland Security, in fiscal year 2014, the U.S. accepted more than 20 million V.W.P. travelers who then spent an estimated \$84 billion on goods and services.**

However, while economic benefits and security standards stem from the Visa Waiver Program, its sheer size, traveler volume, and the continued threat of terrorist activity worldwide demand that we make every effort to strengthen it. As reported by the Government Accountability Office in 2012, approximately 364,000 individuals traveled under the Program in 2010 without verified approval from the Program's "Electronic System for Travel Authorization." I would also note that the attacks on Paris involved the participation of several individuals with French and Belgian citizenship and that Belgian federal prosecutors have indicated that coordination of the Paris plot may have extended to Budapest, Hungary. France, Belgium and Hungary are all visa waiver program countries.

The Department of Homeland Security has taken steps to enhance Visa Waiver Program security since November of 2014. Most recently this month, the Obama Administration announced that the Department of Homeland Security will modify the Program's electronic travel authorization database to collect applicant information regarding past travel to conflict zone or terrorist safe haven countries. However, the Administration itself has noted that more robust program security measures will require congressional authorization and approval.

To this end, the House passed H.R. 158, the *Visa Waiver Program Improvement Act*, by a 407 to 19 vote on Tuesday. This bipartisan legislation, which I cosponsored, seeks to reform the Visa Waiver Program through stringent security and oversight requirements. Among various program enhancements, the bill would prohibit individuals who have traveled to Iraq, Syria, Iran, and other specified nations since March 1st of 2011 from entering the U.S. unless they first undergo biometric screening and interviews by U.S. officials and obtain a regular travel visa. The bill would also require the Department of Homeland Security to remove a country from the program if it does not fully vet or share information on citizens traveling to the U.S. who could pose a threat to national security. Beginning on April 1, 2016, H.R. 158 would further mandate that all passports from Visa Waiver Program countries be machine-readable electronic passports that are fraud-resistant and contain comprehensive biographic and biometric information as determined by the Department of Homeland Security. We must continue to work in a bipartisan manner to ensure that these and other program reforms become law.

Mr. Chairman, I look forward to further discussing the Visa Waiver Program with our witnesses as we examine the additional security measures proposed by Congress and the Administration to enhance Program security. Thank you, Mr. Chairman – I yield the balance of my time.