

**Hearing to Consider the Nomination of Mr. Nicholas J. Rasmussen
to Serve as Director of the National Counterterrorism Center**

**Mr. Nicholas J. Rasmussen
Acting Director, National Counterterrorism Center
Statement for the Record
November 20, 2014**

Chairman Feinstein, Vice Chairman Chambliss, and members of the Committee, let me start by thanking you all very much for considering my nomination to be the next Director of the National Counterterrorism Center. I also appreciate the efforts of the Committee staff, as I know there is a tremendous amount of preparation and review that goes into any confirmation hearing. Given the Senate's busy schedule and the many competing demands you face, it is clear the importance you bestow upon this position and I am grateful.

I would also like to introduce my parents, Mary Jo and Gary Rasmussen, and my wife, Maria Rasmussen. Their love and support means everything to me and I am very glad they are here with me today.

I have briefed this committee several times in closed, classified session in my capacity as NCTC's Deputy Director, but this is my first opportunity to testify before you in open session. I truly welcome this opportunity today. On several occasions I have cited this summer's report from the 9/11 Commissioners and its encouragement of government officials to speak openly and publicly about the threat we face and the actions we're taking to prevent terrorist attacks. I consider this public hearing to be one such opportunity and look forward to describing the threat and the challenges we face in a few moments.

I am honored by the President's trust and confidence in my ability to continue to serve our nation's counterterrorism enterprise. Public service came naturally to me as I had to look no further than to my own family for example and inspiration. My father Gary and my mother Mary Jo moved to northern Virginia in 1962 from Wisconsin so that my father could pursue a career in public policy. He was a career federal employee, beginning at the Department of Agriculture, then working here on Capitol Hill for a short time as a junior staff member, and retiring almost 40 years later as the most senior career official at the Department of Education. My mother was -- for a time -- a public school teacher in Fairfax County, while playing an active role in our local church as well as serving for over a decade on the board of the Northern Virginia Community College. Among my siblings, I have one active duty military officer with two tours of duty in Afghanistan and another who proudly serves his community by working in local government and by volunteering in his church community. Again, everything I ever needed to learn about public service and commitment, I've learned first-hand from my immediate family.

Although I have long way to go before serving as long as my father, I am currently on year 23 of my public service career. While a student at Wesleyan University, I started my

federal government career as an intern in the Department of Defense, working for then-Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs Rich Armitage on the Korea Desk in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. After finishing graduate school at Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, I joined the Department of State as a Presidential Management Intern just as the United States was liberating Kuwait during Operation Desert Storm. My first portfolio was focused on the Arabian Gulf region. I was humbled to work alongside some of our country's most talented and dedicated national security practitioners as they focused on creating a stable security architecture for that critical region.

Throughout my tenure at the Department of State, I was given many extraordinary opportunities, whether it was working on efforts to dissuade the Democratic People's Republic of Korea from continuing its nuclear ambitions, establishing a structure to implement the Dayton Peace Accords in Bosnia, or working towards a lasting resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Then in mid-2001, I accepted a position on the National Security Council staff working for Richard Clarke, the National Coordinator for Security, Infrastructure Protection, and Counterterrorism at that time. My first day on the job was Monday, September 17, 2001, six days after the 9/11 attacks.

Since that day thirteen years ago, I have been singularly focused on our nation's counterterrorism efforts every day, moving between career positions at the White House under Presidents Bush and Obama, and at the National Counterterrorism Center under Directors Brennan, Redd, Leiter, and of course Matt Olsen who selected me as his Deputy in June 2012. Over these years, I have seen vast improvements in our counterterrorism capabilities, structures and policies. That said, significant challenges remain.

The United States, working with allies and partners across the globe, has made great strides in dismantling the al-Qa'ida organization that attacked us in September 2001, but as the 9/11 Commissioners noted in their July report, "the terrorist threat is evolving, not defeated." In fact, the President said as much in his May address to the graduating class at West Point, noting that, "For the foreseeable future, the most direct threat to America at home and abroad remains terrorism." This is what makes the work of the men and women at the National Counterterrorism Center so central to our national security, and why I would very much like the opportunity to lead and serve alongside them as their Director.

As this Committee is well aware, instability in the Levant, the Middle East, and across North Africa has accelerated the decentralization of the al-Qa'ida movement. The movement's once global focus under the direction of Usama bin Laden is now increasingly being driven by local and regional factors and conditions. All across these regions, we are confronting a multitude of threats to the United States and our interests and allies overseas: from longstanding established terrorist groups to new and much more loosely connected networks of like-minded violent extremists that operate without regard to established organizational norms or national borders. As I noted in public testimony before another Senate Committee in September, this less centralized, more geographically dispersed threat is likely to result in more frequent low-level attacks against U.S. and Western interests overseas.

Most notably, the threat from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant—or ISIL—persists, with that ISIL threat being most acute in Iraq, Syria, and the surrounding region. But attacks either linked to or inspired by ISIL in Belgium and Canada, and recent arrests in Europe and Australia demonstrate that the threat beyond the Middle East is real, although thus far limited in sophistication. However, if left unchecked, over time we can expect ISIL's capabilities to mature, and the threat to the United States homeland ultimately to increase.

In addition to ISIL, we are also very concerned about the threat from the Syria-based Khorasan Group. The counterterrorism community is continuously updating our assessments on the threat posed by the Khorasan Group to account for the impact of our military strikes. We remain particularly concerned about threats to commercial aviation from this group as well as from al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, which has tried three times in the past five years to take down commercial passenger and cargo aircraft destined for the United States.

In addition to the high priority groups and networks I have already mentioned, the counterterrorism community works every day to understand and counter threats from a range of other terrorist groups, many of which receive less public attention. These include Sunni terrorist groups active in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, as well as Shia-aligned groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iranian-backed Qods force.

Despite the array of threats we face from international terrorist groups, our analysts at NCTC have assessed for the past three years that the most likely immediate threat here in the United States is that of a relatively unsophisticated attack from a homegrown violent extremist (HVE), probably inspired or motivated by the Sunni extremist narrative that is so pervasive on the Internet. HVEs make use of a dynamic, evolving online environment to connect themselves virtually to a global movement of Sunni violent extremists. The threat these individuals pose to Americans here at home is being fueled by the conflict in Syria and Iraq and is proving particularly difficult to disrupt.

Thus, the terrorist threat persists, and challenges abound. Further complicating the threat picture are losses in collection as the result of unauthorized disclosures, the spread of extremist messaging via social media, and the need to balance technology-based analytic tools with people-intensive eyes-on analysis. If confirmed by the Senate, I look forward to helping the counterterrorism community overcome these challenges in the months and years ahead.

Madam Chairman, I have been part of the NCTC family since its inception in 2004. Even when serving on the National Security Council staff at the White House, I still felt personally connected to this remarkable organization, its vital mission, its uniquely qualified workforce, and its terribly critical place within the Intelligence Community. There is no place in government where I would rather serve.

Ten years ago, when Senators Susan Collins and Joe Lieberman first put a pen to the paper that would become the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004—effectively codifying the existence of a National Counterterrorism Center—the country still believed a large-scale, catastrophic attack was possible, even probable in the near term. Earlier this year, as NCTC commemorated its 10th anniversary, we were honored to host both Senators in our auditorium, where they spoke to the workforce about the many obstacles they faced in bringing about true intelligence reform. For NCTC, they envisioned an integrated and motivated workforce with broad access to information in support of a single counterterrorism mission. Ten years later, I firmly believe we can declare their work to have been a success. That vision has taken hold, and I believe it is growing stronger every day. Yet this is no time for complacency or self-satisfaction, either at NCTC or elsewhere in the counterterrorism community. Our terrorist adversaries are persistent and adaptive, and so too must we learn and change and improve every day.

In my current position, I am reminded of 9/11 and the threat we face every day. If confirmed, I would bring the focus and urgency born of that day to all of my efforts as Director. I would continue to build upon the joint nature of the Center and improve our information sharing at the federal, state and local levels and with key foreign partners. I would ensure the best and brightest continue to fill our ranks, and are equipped with the tools and training they need to meet the terrorist threat. They—and their colleagues throughout the intelligence, law enforcement, diplomatic, homeland security and military communities—are our best defense as a nation.

In my 23 years of government service, I've worn a number of hats: intern, State Department and NCTC officer, NSC staffer, and now most recently, Senior National Intelligence Service officer. But none of those labels means as much to me personally as does the label “member of the Counterterrorism Community.” I am privileged every day to work with truly outstanding friends and partners all across that CT Community—at FBI, CIA, NSA, at the Departments of Defense, Homeland Security, Justice, State, and Treasury, with our state and local partners, with our international partners, at the White House and here on Capitol Hill as well.

The job for which I have been nominated demands much, but I am thankful for the loving support of my wife Maria and the rest of my family, who have been and will continue to be there to support me.

Chairman Feinstein, Vice Chairman Chambliss, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your consideration of my nomination, and I look forward to your questions.