



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on March 8, 2016

## U.S. European Commander: Risk of Terrorists Recruiting Refugees in Europe

Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 1, Air Force General Philip Breedlove (shown) said that the security situation in Europe has grown “more serious and more complicated” over the past months. Among other topics, Breedlove spoke specifically about the threats to European allies and partners posed by ISIS terrorists, and said that his command anticipates “additional European terrorist attacks in the future.”



Addressing how the European refugee crisis is related to the threat of terrorism, Breedlove observed: “There is a concern that criminals, terrorists, foreign fighters and other extremist organizations will recruit from the primarily Muslim populations arriving in Europe, potentially increasing the threat of terrorist attacks.”

Breedlove, who is a four-star general in the Air Force, serves as commander of both the U.S. European Command (EUCOM) and as supreme allied commander for Europe (SACEUR). (Throughout his testimony, he used ISIL, the Obama administration’s preferred term for the Islamic State, which most news outlets refer to as ISIS.)

In making his “theater assessment,” Breedlove stated: “The U.S. and NATO face two primary threats to our security interests: Russian aggression and growing instability on our southern flank [the Middle East and North Africa].” We will focus on the second of these first, because it is considered to be a “hotter” conflict that has been at the forefront of the news.

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Under the second category, “ISIL and Other Threats Coming from the South,” Breedlove noted that “numerous terrorist attacks have taken place in the EUCOM AOR [area of responsibility] over the past year.” Among these, noted the general, were the near-simultaneous attacks in Paris that killed approximately 130 people this past November. Under our military’s organizational chart, the EUCOM AOR covers 21,000,000 square miles and 51 countries and territories, including Europe, Russia, Turkey, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Israel — serving as a reminder of how widespread our interventionist foreign policy has scattered our military operations.

In discussing the advance of Islamic terrorist operations into Europe, Breedlove noted:

Over the past 12 months, ISIL has expanded its operations throughout the EUCOM AOR, formally declaring an expansion of its self-declared “caliphate” into the Caucasus while conducting multiple attacks across the region. ISIL uses social media and online propaganda to radicalize and encourage European extremists to travel to Syria/Iraq or conduct attacks in their home countries. We anticipate additional European terrorist attacks in the future. From Paris to Copenhagen, Belgium to Turkey and the Caucasus, ISIL and Al-Qaida inspired terrorists have conducted attacks that tear apart the fabric of free and democratic societies. These terrorists are not geographically



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limited to Europe. ISIL elements have conducted multiple attacks against European individuals and interests in North Africa including the Sinai. While we expect ISIL terrorists in North Africa will remain focused on internal issues in Africa in the near term, they may pose a greater threat to Europe should they achieve a safe haven in Libya or another North African country.

Our Defense Department places responsibility for Libya and the rest of Africa under the USAFRICOM, the United States Africa Command, headed by Army General David M. Rodriguez.

Breedlove also addressed the threat of al-Qaeda and its affiliates, which he said “possess the ability to conduct mass casualty attacks against U.S. and Allied personnel and facilities in Europe.”

Continuing on in his testimony, Breedlove spoke about the refugee crisis in Europe, correctly noting that more than one million refugees or economic migrants arrived in Europe in 2015, entering the continent primarily through Italy and Greece. He noted that another 2.6 million refugees reside in Turkey. “These figures have trended upward for the past two years and will likely continue to rise in 2016 as the conflict in Syria continues,” he predicted.

As noted earlier, Breedlove repeated the concern expressed by many that criminals, terrorists, foreign fighters, and other extremists will recruit from the primarily Muslim populations arriving in Europe, which potentially will increase the threat of terrorist attacks.

Breedlove also spoke about a significant aspect of the terrorist threat not often addressed: the terrorists’ recruitment of Westerners, who, upon becoming radicalized, pose an especially potent threat because of their ability to blend in among their home country’s population. “Terrorist groups such as ISIL and Syria’s al-Nusra Front (ANF) remain committed to recruiting foreigners, especially Westerners, to participate in the ongoing Syrian conflict. The ability of many of these Europe-originated foreign fighters to return to Europe or the U.S. makes them ideal candidates to conduct or inspire future terrorist attacks,” he noted.

Notice that Breedlove included the United States among the possible targets for radicalized Westerners. It is not hard to imagine how serious a threat this poses, since our immigration authorities and general population have been conditioned to be suspicious of “foreign-looking” Middle Easterners and may not suspect (for example) an American-born individual of Northern European ancestry of being a terrorist.

While the ongoing threat of ISIS and other militants emanating from the Middle East — especially in conjunction with the Syrian refugee crisis — may receive most of our attention, Breedlove’s commentary on other areas is also worth noting.

Breedlove started off his testimony by identifying two threats: the “southern flank,” which we just discussed, and “Russian aggression.”

After summarizing the overtures that the United States and its European allies have made toward establishing a cooperative relationship with Russia since the 1990s, Breedlove concluded that “it is now clear Russia does not share common security objectives with the West. Instead, it continues to view the United States and NATO as a threat to its own security.”

In assessing Russia’s aggressiveness, Breedlove offered a comprehensive summary of that nation’s policies in the Arctic region, toward Ukraine, the Baltic states, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Syria. Since the ongoing civil war and turmoil that contributed to the refugee crisis are paramount among these, let us see what Breedlove says about Russia’s involvement there:



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Russia's military intervention in Syria has bolstered the regime of Bashar al-Assad, targeted U.S.-supported opposition elements, and complicated U.S. and Coalition operations against ISIL. The Syrian crisis is destabilizing the entire region, and Russia's military intervention changed the dynamics of the conflict, which may lead to new or greater threats to the U.S. and its Allies for years to come. Moscow's ongoing operations in Syria underscore Russia's ability and willingness to conduct expeditionary operations and its modernized military capabilities which are emboldening the Kremlin to increase its access and influence in a key geopolitical region.

While few would suggest that Russia's intentions in Syria are promoted by humanitarian concerns, it must be said that those U.S.-supported opposition elements that Breedlove accused Russia of targeting included radical elements affiliated with al-Qaeda.

The folly of arming these anti-Assad rebels was pointed out by former Representative Ron Paul (R-Texas) and his son Senator Rand Paul (R-Ky.), who have made numerous statements critical of U.S. interventionism in the Middle East. The younger Paul wrote an article published by *Politico* in 2013 explaining why the United States should not send aid to the rebels in Syria, stating, "Americans would probably be surprised to learn that their government was arming affiliates of Al Qaeda. But this is essentially what President Barack Obama is about to do."

It has been shown that ISIS has armed itself with weaponry originally supplied to the anti-Assad rebels by the United States — weapons ISIS could not have acquired if the United States had not sent arms to those insurgents.

Documentation of how U.S. assistance to the anti-Assad rebels benefited ISIS can be found in our article "[ISIS: The Best Terror Threat U.S. Tax Money Can Buy.](#)"

Although it can be shown that U.S. intervention in the Middle East, particularly our invasion of Iraq and our support for the anti-Assad rebels, has destabilized the region and only enabled the rise of ISIS, Breedlove in his testimony asked for greater "support of CENTCOM's counter-ISIL mission." He stated:

In response to the new European security environment, I have strongly advocated for, and our Defense Department, Administration, and Congress have supported, not only suspending further drawdown of this theater, but now the need to look at tailored, supportable increases in capabilities as we requested in the FY 2017 budget.

Contrast Breedlove's call for an expansion of U.S. involvement overseas with a [statement](#) made by former Representative Ron Paul charging that it was our intervention that created the refugees crisis that has so impacted the area of Breedlove's area of responsibility:

The reason so many are fleeing places like Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, and Iraq is that US and European interventionist foreign policy has left these countries destabilized with no hopes of economic recovery. This mass migration from the Middle East and beyond is a direct result of the neocon foreign policy of regime change, invasion, and pushing "democracy" at the barrel of a gun.

Breedlove's warnings about the likelihood of ISIS and other terrorists embedding themselves among the Syrian refugee population and infiltrating Europe, and even the United States, should be taken seriously — as should his warning that these groups might recruit Westerners who could then return to Europe or the United States to conduct future terrorist attacks. However, our national security will be most effective if it focuses on protecting America, not intervening overseas to effect regime change. The former actions will protect us, while the latter will only inspire more terrorism and subsequent blowback.



*Photo: AP Images*

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