

Statement of Steven N. Simon
Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

“Priorities for Homeland Security”

Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee on this vital topic.

Just as a preamble, my remarks do not reflect the views of the Council on Foreign Relations, which does not have a corporate position on these matters.

My understanding of the Committee’s objectives in holding this hearing is that witnesses should focus on the future and address themselves to issues that might help both Congress and the Executive branch set homeland security priorities. The Committee it seems to me is doing the right thing. Our vulnerability at home to terrorist assault, as well as to natural disasters, is essentially infinite. The fact is that not everything can be protected. Judicious decisions about what to protect given our wholesale and inevitable exposure to attack by clever and disciplined terrorists are essential.

What follows are my personal reflections on this vexing problem. Given the myriad threats to our infrastructure – critical and otherwise – and to the lives of our fellow citizens, other analysts will legitimately come to different conclusions about the best way to focus our collective efforts and especially those of the agencies under the jurisdiction of this committee, and of departments and agencies with which DHS must interact continuously and cooperatively in order to fulfill its daunting mandate.

I will concentrate on three issues: first, the importance of cities as terrorist havens and terrorist targets; second, the continuing significance to many jihadists of weapons of mass destruction (WMD); and third, the need to preserve the good will and sense of belonging of America’s Muslim communities as a matter of national security, beyond the intrinsic virtues of a cohesive, considerate society in which citizens of all creeds can feel at home.

Urban Warfare

The jihad that has evolved since September 11th has become a war of cities. The transition from caves to condos, as one observer described this evolution, is impressive. Although the relatively remote, rural bases that incubated the jihad had strong advantages, especially given the centrality of social networks to the early jihad, municipalities have their own attractions. They offer anonymity, but also community, both of which can confer a kind of cover. Urban neighborhoods, with their numberless apartments, coffee-houses, mosques and Islamic centers, provide the setting for recruitment, clandestine meetings, preparation of weapons and other activities that form the terrorist enterprise. Moreover, the majority of urban areas in which jihadists have established a presence are not targets for air strikes, Hellfire missiles, or submarine-launched cruise missiles. Think of Muhammad Atta’s Hamburg, or the Leeds of Muhammad Siddique Khan, orchestrator of the 7/7 bombings of the London underground

and bus systems. Post-bin Laden jihadists are not the first militants to avail themselves of these tactical conveniences. The radical campaign in Egypt that began in mid-1970s was spawned in Cairo, one of the world's largest cities. And of course non-Muslim terrorist organizations, such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), have long thrived in urban areas. It could be said that having adapted to city life, the jihad has really come into its own.

Qualities that favor the jihadists' defensive requirements do not tell the whole story. The other side is that cities are where their targets – both symbolic and of flesh-and-blood – are to be found in abundance and proximity. There are many aspects of Islamist militancy that are quintessentially modern. The transformation of cities into fields of jihad is a classic example of the movement's modernity. It is part and parcel of the post-World War II process of urbanization that swept the Middle East, North Africa and Pakistan. Large-scale migration of Muslims to Europe represents perhaps the last phase of this urbanizing process. In these cities, Muslims radicalized by a potent combination of powerful imagery in the media, socio-economic exclusion, and a set of simple, but internally consistent religious and ideological concepts, have ample targets for their hunger for retribution and duty – from their perspective – of self-defense. One of the striking features of contemporary Muslim public opinion to emerge from recent Pew polls is the degree to which Muslims in far-flung, diverse places have come to see themselves as having “more in common nowadays.” This attitude can be seen at work in the United Kingdom, Spain, Germany, The Netherlands and Denmark. Events far removed geographically from these countries, especially developments in Iraq, have mobilized youth in each of their capitals.

New York has already shown itself to be a crucial target for jihadists. This great city was construed by al-Qaeda to be the beating heart of America's economy, which bin Laden believed he could cripple; the symbol of American arrogance as embodied by the “looming towers” of the World Trade Center; and the seat of Jewish power, which jihadists believe accounts for the global subordination of Muslim interests to America and Israel. It is also a teeming city, whose large and densely packed population promised the most efficient path to a successful mass attack that –from a jihadist viewpoint -- might begin to even the score with the United States. There is no reason to think that this conviction has weakened. Furthermore, New York City proffers the same advantages to the attacker as do all large cities.

The array of targeting opportunities in New York is wide. Although we can be perversely certain that the attack, when it comes, will be the one we least expected, some preliminary judgments are possible. Mass transportation, which the jihadists have attacked elsewhere with some success, the financial district or banks, symbols of authority, and perhaps schools, given al Qaeda's insistence on the need to avenge the tens of thousands of Muslim children it believes were deliberately killed by the U.S., either directly or through Israeli action thought to be sponsored by Washington. Car or truck bombs -- the icon of urban violence in Iraq and used effectively before then in Lebanon and Argentina by Hezbollah and elsewhere by others including the IRA, the Basque separatist group ETA and the Baader-Meinhof gang -- should also be expected at some

point. Similarly, we might expect Palestinian style backpack bombs carried into restaurants or other public places by solitary suicidal attackers.

The implications of this analysis are, first, that community policing and extensive video surveillance probably need to be stepped up. In this kind of urban warfare, intelligence is acquired best by those who are most familiar with the terrain: police officers walking their beat. On the front line, they get to know their neighborhoods, the residents and the shopkeepers, form and cultivate relationships with local citizens, and develop a sense of the natural order of things and therefore of signs that something is out of the ordinary or warrants investigation. The pivotal role of local law enforcement is reinforced by the incapacity of federal authorities to gather information skillfully, discretely, effectively, and without alienating potential sources of intelligence. The FBI, in particular, presently lacks the numbers, skills, knowledge base and orientation to contribute.

This does not mean however that local law enforcement can or should operate in a vacuum, especially in light of connections that have been disclosed between the self-starter groups in the U.K. and al-Qaeda figures in Pakistan. On the contrary, local police need an umbilical connection to national intelligence agencies in order to connect the dots they're collecting on the ground. It is worth noting that the success of the UK counterterrorism effort in Northern Ireland was largely due the tight linkages between the local police, national police, and Britain's domestic intelligence agency that were forged early in the conflict.

Yet information sharing, which all parties claim to be essential, has not advanced significantly. In part this seems to be due to a lack of leadership, and in part to a slow pace of work that seems incommensurate with the urgency of the threat. Thus, issuance of U.S. government sponsored clearances for local police officers, the necessary first step toward sharing intelligence information, has lagged. Even the New York Police Department (NYPD), which has built a very aggressive intelligence collection program and uncommonly close ties to Washington intelligence agencies, has only about 350 cleared officers, or less than one per cent of the force. Many of these patrolmen and detectives have clearances via their status as military reservists rather than as police officers. Countrywide, cleared personnel are usually the handful of detailees to the local Joint Terrorism Task Force. The circle clearly needs to widen.

The other dimension to this issue is the apparent substitution of quantity for quality as Washington's criterion for information sharing with local law enforcement. This puts municipal authorities in the worst of both worlds. The information does not help them do their jobs better, while the sheer volume of unhelpful information can make it harder to manage their responsibilities.

The bigger question, however, is where these police officers will come from, at a time when State, local and federal budgets are under severe pressure. In the upcoming federal budget cycle the COPS program is again under pressure to be cut. This program has put more than 100,000 new police officers on the street over the last decade. Instead of

eliminating this program it should be revamped to create the local intelligence capacity cities need.

WMD

Amid growing concerns about the vulnerability of ground transportation, civil aviation, financial institutions and landmarks to large bombs, one should not lose sight of the chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear threats. As many experts have usefully pointed out, jihadists, like other terrorists, prefer tried-and-true methods and shy away from technical innovation. This is certainly true as a general proposition, despite important exceptions, from the first use of dynamite by anarchists early in the 20th century to the experimentation with stabilized liquid explosives by Ramzi Ahmed Yousef in 1995.

Yet intramural jihadist tactical and strategic discussions frequently refer to the use of one or another form of weapon of mass destruction. Not every contributor to this debate defines the utility of these weapons in the same way. For some jihadists, WMDs are the golden key to a reversal of fortune, for which the Muslim world allegedly yearns. Others see these weapons in less apocalyptic terms and more as tools for “worldly war.” For these jihadists, unconventional weapons are the indispensable instruments of the weaker party in an asymmetric struggle. Whether such a weapon is used in the belief that it will decisively settle the argument between Muslims and their chief enemy, or in pursuit of tactical effects meant to deter the enemy or deny him specific options, a toxic or radiological release or detonation of a nuclear weapon would have dramatic consequences.

The social and economic effects would obviously be proportional to the damage, but the baseline for these effects would be high. Thus, most experts believe that if such a weapon is used it is unlikely to cause mass casualties. Nevertheless, even an attack that took relatively few lives would have an emotional and psychological impact that could tear the fabric of our society and undermine the social contract between government and society. It would also have sizable, perhaps open-ended economic costs, especially if the attacks were repeated or authorities could not assure citizens that the attackers had all been captured or killed. The implication here is twofold. First, Washington must make consequence management a priority. This means not only allocating appropriated funds, but also establishing a high, federally defined performance standard that cities would have to meet reasonably swiftly. The reason for this emphasis on consequence management is simply that a well-planned attack will be difficult to prevent without an uncommon dose of good luck. This being the case, the surest way to stave off the worst emotional, political and economic damage is to show not only the victimized community, but also the American public that the effects of the attack are being handled with confidence and competence by local and federal authorities working quickly and smoothly – and in lockstep.

Efforts to do this have been broached repeatedly, ever since the second Nunn-Lugar bill was signed into law in 1996. Some of these initiatives failed because the government

was not structured in a way that yielded a lead agency that could or would be held responsible for this important job. Now that we have a Department of Homeland Security, this impediment has been swept away. It is now time to systematize consequence management where it matters most, which is in large American cities.

The other implication is that Washington and local leaders must begin soon to educate the public about the kind of CBRN attacks that are likely to occur. The purpose is not to scare people. Rather, it is to ensure that Americans understand that for the foreseeable future, a CBRN attack will not necessarily equate to instant annihilation, that it is likely to kill or wound relatively small numbers, and that the federal government and local authorities are prepared for such an eventuality. This is easier said than done, owing to the non-trivial risk that terrorists acquire a weapon capable of a catastrophic nuclear yield. An educational initiative would have to acknowledge this possibility, even as it strove to counter the effect of the Katrina aftermath on public confidence in the competence of their government.

As part of this effort, dedicated broadcasting channels should be set up so that authorities can communicate with the public throughout a crisis and so that the public knows exactly how to “tune-in” to this source of information and guidance. Given the plethora of electronic media and the scarcity of bandwidth, operationalizing this recommendation will not be easy. In a crisis, however, we will wish we had it available.

It goes without saying that the trans-attack and post-attack message must be fully coordinated among federal state and local agencies. It will be just as vital for all these players to have decided beforehand who will be empowered to speak publicly and about what. In the absence of such discipline, the public will be awash in contradictory and inconsistent statements and quickly conclude that no one is in charge. This perception will fuel the panic and desperation latent in what will be a terrifying and unprecedented situation.

Muslim-Americans

The 9/11 disaster showed that skilled, self-possessed and highly determined attackers could do tremendous damage to the homeland without having to rely on a support network within the United States. Halting and uneven progress on border security, especially at airports, has reduced the probability of this sort of attack by injecting uncertainty into terrorist calculations of their chances of getting in. Deterrence at that level does seem to work.

This type of attack, however, is not the adversary’s sole option. Other approaches do require infrastructure, in the shape of cells that may or may not be linked to outside networks. A glance toward Western Europe, where this phenomenon seems to be well established, raises questions about circumstances here at home.

The conventional wisdom is that Europe’s Muslim’s discontent is a result of failed immigration policies that could not affect America’s prosperous, happy Muslims, who

have benefited from the welcoming embrace of our “melting pot” nation. This view may not reflect reality, even if it once did. Recent research shows that “the real story of American Muslims is one of accelerating alienation,” which could produce a “rejectionist generation.”

Muslims are increasingly choosing not to assimilate into American society, finding solace in their religious identity instead. Muslim students’ associations on college campuses are growing rapidly as havens for Muslims who prefer not to socialize with non-Muslims, and Muslims are building Islamic schools as alternatives to a public school system perceived as inhospitable. To thwart media bias, Muslims are developing their own radio programs and publications. These initiatives may resemble those taken by other religious and ethnic groups in the United States since the nineteenth century to promote acceptance and assimilation. But the Muslims’ situation differs in that many perceive their nation’s foreign and domestic policy agenda as a campaign against their faith.

The domestic aftermath of the 9/11 attacks implied that a low religious profile was better for their health, that they couldn’t take their civil rights for granted, and that their interests depended on the absence of serious future attacks within the United States. Iraq further dimmed America’s promise to its Muslims. The U.S. Muslim community is deeply skeptical about U.S. democracy promotion, which many think are undercut by lack of due process at home and support for authoritarian rulers abroad. In particular, Muslims vocally decry what they see as the biased implementation of the USA PATRIOT Act and the absence of official American sympathy for the victimization of Muslims worldwide, especially Palestinians.

The evolving attitudes of non-Muslim Americans towards their Muslim compatriots are likely to spur alienation. According to a 2006 Gallup poll, a third of Americans admire “nothing” about the Muslim world. Nearly half of all Americans believe the U.S. government should restrict the civil liberties of Muslim Americans. Since September 11, they have faced increasing racism, employment and housing discrimination, and vandalism. The Justice Department has undertaken high-profile prosecutions based on meager evidence, flawed procedure or misidentification. Media coverage dwelling on the violence associated with radical Islam, and ignoring the respectable lifestyles of most American Muslims, along with rhetoric of some on the Christian Right casting the war on terrorism as a clash of religions, contributes to the public’s misunderstanding of Islam.

To be sure, Muslims in the United States have shown no sign of violent protest, and American Muslims’ relative prosperity may function as a brake on radicalization. Yet U.S. Muslims’ post-9/11 insularity suggests that some, like many European Muslims, may seek psychological sanctuary in the *umma* – that is, the notional global community of Muslims. And the *umma* is where Osama bin Laden’s brand of militancy has maximum traction.

The U.S. government also has not manifested trust in the nation’s Muslims. While the pool of Muslims available for official duty may not be large, the federal government has made no serious efforts to recruit Muslims for confirmable policy positions. Meanwhile,

mutual distrust has burgeoned. The U.S. administration should consult American Muslims directly and earnestly on foreign-policy issues, as it has customarily done with other politically important minority constituencies – e.g., American Jews with respect to Israel, Irish-Americans on Northern Ireland, and Greek-Americans as to Turkey and Cyprus. The difference here is that the electoral leverage of American Muslims is relatively weak. But their potential vulnerability to an incendiary ideology of confrontation that is being disseminated transnationally should override the normal course of domestic politics. Fear of being punished at the polls should not be the only incentive to be more attentive to Muslim concerns and anxieties.

Finally, the Madrid and London bombings only confirm that governments need to understand the campaign against transnational Islamist terrorism as an internal security problem to a much greater extent than they have so far. The current approach, however, has been simply to enforce a zero-tolerance immigration policy with respect to the Muslim community. This dispensation has the doubly perverse quality of being both ineffective in counter-terrorism terms and alienating with respect to Muslim Americans. Domestic law enforcement's ranks should also include more Muslims, both to improve the FBI's understanding of and links with Muslim communities and to give Muslims a sense of ownership of America's security challenges. American Muslims do not remotely pose the domestic threat that European Muslims do. To ensure it stays that way, they need to be embraced – not spurned.

I put this issue before the committee for lack of a better place. The challenge outlined here requires leadership and a program. Yet given the way our government is structured, there is no obvious lead agency, or special assistant to the President on the National Security Council or Homeland Security Council, to formulate a program or provide the leadership. We are not the first to face this conundrum. Several years ago, in the wake of a Whitehall study showing upwards of 10,000 al Qaeda supporters in Great Britain, Her Majesty's government tasked the Security Service – MI5 – both to dismantle jihadist networks and devise a plan to win the hearts and minds of Britain's Muslim minority. Ultimately, the Security Services balked at a difficult job for which they had no experience or clear jurisdiction. We need to do better. Fortunately, unlike our sister democracies across the Atlantic, we have time. We must not squander it.