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Eight Years After 9/11: Confronting the Terrorist Threat to the Homeland

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Introduction

Chairman Lieberman, Ranking Member Collins, distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity today to discuss the current state of the terrorist threat to the Homeland and the U.S. Government's efforts to address the threat. I am pleased to join Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano and Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Robert Mueller—two of the National Counterterrorism Center's (NCTC) closest and most critical partners.

Nature of the Terrorist Threat

The Current Threat from Al-Qa'ida. Al-Qa'ida is under more pressure, is facing more challenges, and is a more vulnerable organization than at any time since the attacks on 11 September 2001. For eight years, the United States and its allies have mounted a robust and multi-front offensive against al-Qa'ida, as well as sustained an effective defensive program, making it more difficult—although still quite possible—for terrorists to attack the US Homeland and US interests abroad.

- Most importantly, al-Qa'ida's safehaven -- where they are hosted by Taliban and Pakistani militants -- in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) is shrinking and becoming less secure, complicating the group's ability to plan, train, and move within Pakistan's tribal areas.
- Al-Qa'ida has suffered significant leadership losses during the past 18 months, interrupting training and plotting, potentially disrupting plots that are under way, and leaving leadership vacuums that are increasingly difficult to fill.

Despite our counterterrorism (CT) progress, al-Qa'ida and its affiliates and allies remain resilient and adaptive enemies intent on attacking US and Western interests—with al-Qa'ida's core in Pakistan representing the most dangerous component of the larger al-Qa'ida network. We assess that this core is actively engaged in operational plotting and continues recruiting, training, and transporting operatives, to include individuals from Western Europe and North America.

- Three years ago the British, with United States help, disrupted a plot in its late stages that could have killed thousands of people flying from Europe to the US Homeland. Two years ago we helped disrupt a credible plot in Germany that was very near execution.
- The recent arrest and indictment of Najibullah Zazi on a charge of conspiracy to use weapons of mass destruction (explosive bombs) against persons or property in the United States is an example of the strong teamwork needed between local police departments and federal departments and agencies that is critical to protecting our country from potential terrorist attacks. As stated in the indictment, Zazi is alleged to have knowingly and intentionally conspired with others to use explosive bombs and other similar devices against persons or property within the United States
- We assess that al-Qa'ida continues to pursue plans for Homeland attacks and is likely focusing on prominent political, economic, and infrastructure targets designed to produce

mass casualties, visually dramatic destruction, significant economic aftershocks, and/or fear among the population. The group also likely remains interested in targeting mass transit systems, and other public venues, viewed as relatively soft targets as evidenced by past al-Qa'ida attacks in London.

Al-Qa'ida Affiliates. As al-Qa'ida's affiliates continue to develop and evolve, the threat posed by many of these groups to US interests abroad, and potentially to the Homeland, has grown. The affiliates possess local roots and autonomous command structures and represent a talent pool that al-Qa'ida core may tap to augment operational efforts. The affiliates have proven capable of attacking Western targets in their regions and they aspire to expand operations further.

Yemen. We have witnessed the reemergence of al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), with Yemen as a key battleground and potential regional base of operations from which al-Qa'ida can plan attacks, train recruits, and facilitate the movement of operatives. We are concerned that if AQAP strengthens, al-Qa'ida leaders could use the group and the growing presence of foreign fighters in the region to supplement its transnational operations capability.

Al-Qa'ida Operatives in Somalia and Al-Shabaab. East Africa is an important locale for al-Qa'ida. The leaders of the Somalia-based insurgent and terrorist group al-Shabaab are working with a limited number of East Africa-based al-Qa'ida operatives. Al-Shabaab has actively conducted terrorist style attacks in Somalia against the Somali Government and its perceived allies or supporters, including African Union peacekeepers. Al-Shabaab's rank and file fighters—who are predominantly interested in removing the current government of Somalia vice pursuing al-Qa'ida's global agenda—have gained control over specific locations in central and southern Somalia, in an effort to create an Islamic state throughout greater Somalia.

Training programs run by al-Shabaab in southern Somalia have attracted hundreds of violent extremists from across the globe, to include dozens of recruits from the United States. We assess that U.S. persons – the majority of whom are ethnic Somali -- who have traveled to Somalia to fight and train with al-Shabaab have been primarily motivated by nationalism and identification with the Somali cause, rather than by al-Qa'ida's global agenda. However, the potential for al-Qa'ida operatives in Somalia to commission Americans to return to the United States and launch attacks against the Homeland remains of significant concern. The recent death of East Africa-based senior al-Qa'ida operative Saleh Nabhan could disrupt for the time being al-Qa'ida's linkage with al-Shabaab and hinder external attack planning in the region.

- Although al-Shabaab has not yet conducted an attack outside of Somalia, we have identified several potential transnational terrorist plots involving individuals trained in Somalia. For example, Australian police in August arrested four men involved in plotting an attack against an Australian Army base, two of whom reportedly trained at camp in Somalia.

North Africa and the Trans-Sahara. AQIM has expanded its operational presence in North Africa beyond Algeria, using a safehaven in Northern Mali and increasing low-level operations in Mauritania and has conducted more than a dozen attacks against Western interests in the region. We have seen increased interest by the group to conduct attacks in Europe—to include public statements threatening France and other European powers—as well as the United States.

AQIM's increased focus on kidnap-for ransom operations, particularly of Western hostages, has allowed for the group's expansion, helping fund recruitment, training, propaganda and terrorist attacks.

Iraq. Counterterrorism success in Iraq has lowered the external threat from al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI)—a key al-Qa'ida affiliate in the region—and has damaged the al-Qa'ida brand, with many donors reticent to support the kinds of gruesome attacks that became the hallmark of AQI. Although AQI's leaders continue to publicly threaten the West, to include the Homeland, we assess that their ability to do so has been substantially diminished by Coalition military and Iraqi security operations. However, the group remains the largest and most operationally active of al-Qa'ida's affiliates and continues to threaten Coalition forces in the region.

Lashkar-e-Tayyiba. Pakistan-based Sunni extremist group Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LT)—an al-Qa'ida ally—poses a threat to a range of interests in South Asia. Their attacks in Kashmir and India have had a destabilizing effect on the region, increasing tensions and brinkmanship between New Delhi and Islamabad. The group's attack last year in Mumbai, India, resulted in US and Western casualties, and the group continues to plan attacks in India that could harm US citizens and damage US interests. LT's involvement in attacks in Afghanistan against US and Coalition forces and provision of support to the Taliban and al-Qa'ida extremists there pose a threat to US and Coalition interests. We assess that LT—or LT-trained individuals—could pose a direct threat to the Homeland, especially should they collude with al-Qa'ida operatives.

Homegrown Violent Extremists. Homegrown Muslim extremists who have little if any connection to known terrorist organizations have not launched a successful attack in the United States. The handful of homegrown extremists who have sought to strike within the Homeland since 9/11 have lacked the necessary tradecraft and capability to conduct or facilitate sophisticated attacks.

Al-Qa'ida's Media Campaign. Al-Qa'ida propaganda statements this year have provided valuable insight into the group's strategic intentions and have reiterated their commitment to attacking US and Western interests worldwide. Public al-Qa'ida statements rarely contain a specific threat or telegraph attack planning.

- The recently released statement that threatens Germany with near-term attacks if the election fails to favor the candidate who will withdraw German troops from Afghanistan is an exception to standard al-Qa'ida practice as it features a specific threat timed to influence the German elections scheduled for 27 September.
- Al-Qa'ida statements have addressed three main themes this year—first, the group's continued desire to attack US interests; second, the group's claim that it has inspired or partnered with emerging and sometimes more successful fronts in Somalia, the Sahel, and the Arabian Peninsula, which it says serves the same purpose and achieves the same aims as past major operations; and third, al-Qa'ida's claim that its actions on and since 9/11 have caused significant damage to the US economy.
- Al-Qa'ida has also released a number of statements this year directed at Pakistan. We assess that this is in direct response to Pakistani military actions against their safehavens in the tribal areas and nearby settled areas such as the Swat Valley. Despite increasing

pressure on their safehaven this year, al-Sahab, the al-Qa'ida media arm, is still rapidly producing propaganda and will probably outpace last year's production.

Violent Shia Extremists. While not aligned with al-Qa'ida, we assess that Lebanese Hizballah remains capable of conducting terrorist attacks on US and Western interests, particularly in the Middle East. It continues to train and sponsor terrorist groups in Iraq that threaten the lives of US and Coalition forces, and supports Palestinian terrorist groups' efforts to attack Israel and jeopardize the Middle East Peace Process. Although its primary focus is Israel, the group holds the United States responsible for Israeli policies in the region and would likely consider attacks on US interests, to include the Homeland, if it perceived a direct threat from the United States to itself or Iran. Hizballah's Secretary General, in justifying the group's use of violence against fellow Lebanese citizens last year, characterized any threat to Hizballah's armed status and its independent communications network as redlines.

WMD-Terrorism. The threat of WMD terrorism to the Homeland remains a grave concern. Documents recovered in Afghanistan indicated that al-Qa'ida was pursuing a sophisticated biological weapons program and testing chemical agents. Since 9/11, we have successfully disrupted these and other terrorist efforts to develop a WMD capability. However, al-Qa'ida and other groups continue to seek such a capability for use against the Homeland and US interests overseas. While terrorists face technical hurdles to developing and employing WMD, the consequences of a successful attack force us to consider every possible threat against the Homeland, even those considered low probability.

Coordination of Counterterrorism Efforts

US Government Strategy to Counter Terrorism. The 9/11 Commission, reflecting on the paucity of joint action and planning that characterized the US Government's approach to terrorism before the 2001 attacks, recommended the creation of a "a civilian-led unified joint command for CT," combining both strategic intelligence and joint operational planning. The Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 (IRTPA) brought this recommendation to life through legislation, creating NCTC and its strategic operational planning authorities. For the first time, an organization outside the Executive Office of the President was given the responsibility for government-wide coordination of planning and integration of department and agency actions involving "all elements of national power," including "diplomatic, financial, military, intelligence, Homeland security, and law enforcement activities within and among agencies."

Pursuant to this authority, the Director of NCTC is responsible for providing strategic CT plans and for effectively integrating CT intelligence and operations across agency boundaries, both inside and outside the US.

The baseline US Government strategy for countering terrorism is the NCTC-authored and Presidentially-approved National Implementation Plan for Counterterrorism (NIP). The NIP consists of four "pillars" that correspond to national policy: 1) protect and defend against terrorists; 2) attack their capacity to operate; 3) work diligently to undermine the spread of violent extremism and retard radicalization around the world; and 4) prevent terrorists from utilizing WMD.

The NIP establishes a firm strategic foundation for action by requiring that each department and agency work collectively to achieve the endstates described in the objectives and sub-objectives of each pillar. However, without a sustained, focused effort to *implement* the NIP—a process that brings together lead and partner departments and agencies and the NSC to actively work to overcome the operational, legal, resource, and policy impediments to achieving the NIP’s strategic objectives—the plan would be of limited value. Although I am unable to speak to all of our efforts or provide extensive detail in an unclassified setting, below I offer a few examples of the more granular synchronization efforts we are pursuing in conjunction with the White House and Departments and Agencies throughout the US Government.

Interagency Task Force (ITF). The ITF, established in June 2007, is charged with ensuring that US Government CT activities—and the resources to support them—are correlated rapidly with a constantly evolving threat picture and level of risk. The ITF may focus, as directed by the NSC, on an individual threat, but more typically it seeks to develop and coordinate overall strategic interagency action appropriate to the *aggregate* threat picture. Led by NCTC, the ITF comprises a core group of department and agency representatives who constantly examine current intelligence to ensure ongoing prevention efforts are synergistically executed. If additional, more alarming intelligence is obtained, the ITF formulates domestic and overseas options for senior policy makers to enable an appropriately tailored US Government response to any given threat.

Exercises. NCTC also develops and facilitates national and local exercises to improve domestic preparedness at all levels of the US Government, as well as that of our international partners. The most recent capabilities review exercise hosted by NCTC tested the federal response to a Mumbai-style attack in an urban environment. These exercise “lessons learned” have been shared, in coordination with DHS and FBI, with other federal, state and local authorities in an effort to bring our law enforcement and homeland security communities closer together.

Global Engagement. NCTC continues to play a large role in interagency efforts to counter violent extremism, both around the world and at home. For example, NCTC coordinated the development of a strategic communications strategy for the interagency to support efforts led by the President’s Special Representative on Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) and Central Command in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Working with these partners, plus others in the State Department, Department of Defense, and the Intelligence Community, NCTC produced a coordinated interagency plan that is now being used by, the State Department and commanders in the field.

NCTC has also developed an analytical tool that is providing, for the first time, a deep look at ongoing US Government programs that seek to build ties with the Afghan and Pakistani people. This tool is helping senior government leaders evaluate the efforts that have been made in the past and identify new types of programs that should be pursued.

On the domestic front, NCTC enables, informs and supports federal, state and local government efforts to engage with communities across our country. Central to this effort is NCTC’s leadership of an interagency group to coordinate engagement projects and activities conducted by the FBI, DHS, State, Justice, Treasury and others. In particular, NCTC has worked diligently through this group with its partner agencies to enhance the level of engagement between the US

Government and Somali Americans and build communities that are increasingly resistant to the threat posed by extremism.

Afghanistan/Pakistan. Working closely with SRAP, NCTC has coordinated CT-related planning efforts designed to support development and implementation of a broader US Government strategy in this key region. NCTC led an interagency effort to refine specific counterterrorism objectives and develop measures of performance, as well as to identify and synchronize associated department and agency actions and initiatives to achieve these strategic objectives. NCTC also assisted departments and agencies with identifying associated resource requirements and implementation timelines.

Region-specific efforts. Outside of South Asia, NCTC is working with our interagency partners—such as the Departments of Defense, State, Justice, and Treasury, and key members of the Intelligence Community—to develop and coordinate the implementation of plans designed to disrupt and diminish the capability of specific terrorist organizations and their networks, and to eliminate identified regional safehavens. Planning efforts include the development of whole-of-government strategic objectives; interagency synchronization of initiatives designed to achieve those objectives; the identification of necessary resources and key milestones; and development of potential foreign partner actions.

Budget. Working with our mission partners, we have helped develop a methodology for departments and agencies to use in aligning their resources for counterterrorism. As a result, we were able to align CT resources to the strategic objectives of the National Implementation Plan, as well as provide recommendations for new areas of emphasis in the FY11 budget build. Subsequently, OMB and the NSC issued budgetary guidance to the interagency to implement these recommendations.

Assessments. In order to successfully guide development of strategies and plans to counter an active and agile enemy, NCTC monitors and assesses overall NIP implementation as well as the impact of subordinate CT plans and guidance. NCTC's strategic impact assessments are designed to provide a tangible and well-understood "feedback loop" to CT planners and policy makers that takes a wide variety of vital factors into consideration, including strategic and operational outcomes arising from US Government and partner nation counterterrorism programs and activities; developments in enemy strategy and actions; and changes in the operating environment. The goal is to provide a useful tool that may be used to refine and guide the next generation of CT strategy and plans.

Conclusion

Chairman Lieberman and Ranking Member Collins, I want to conclude by recognizing this Committee for the role it played in the creation of the National Counterterrorism Center. Without your leadership the strides we have jointly made to counter the terrorist threat would not be possible. Your continued support is critical to the Center's mission to lead our nation's effort to combat terrorism at home and abroad by analyzing the threat, sharing that information with out partners, and integrating all instruments of national power to ensure unity of effort. I look forward to continuing our work together in the years to come.