Opening Statement for Chairman Joseph Lieberman
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee
"Homeland Threats and Agency Responses"
Wednesday, September 19, 2012

Good morning and welcome to this hearing, focusing on threats to our homeland and what our key homeland security and counterterrorism agencies are doing to address those threats.

I'm pleased to welcome back Secretary Napolitano, Director Olsen, and welcome the Associate Deputy Director of the FBI, Kevin Perkins, standing in for Director Mueller today. The director had to undergo an unexpected surgical procedure resulting from complications associated with a recent dental treatment so he is unable to join us today. But we welcome Mr. Perkins in his stead with confidence, and we extend the best for the Director's speedy recovery.

This will be the final time that I chair a hearing with each of you as witnesses, and I'd like to publicly thank each of you for your leadership in our nation's homeland security and counterterrorism efforts, and for the productive relationship that each of you and officials at your agencies have had with this Committee.

The obvious fact is, as I look at the three of you, and then look back to September 11, 2001, two of the three of these organizations did not exist, and the FBI was a very different organization that focused on domestic crime. In the aftermath of the attacks, Congress and the executive created the Department of Homeland Security and, pursuant to the 9/11 Commission recommendations, the National Counter Terrorism Center. The FBI essentially recreated itself into a first-rate domestic counterterrorist intelligence agency, in addition to carrying out its other responsibilities. In his absence, I think we should thank Director Mueller for overseeing this historic transformation and thank you Secretary Napolitano and Director Olsen for what you've done.

Together these changes represent the most significant reforms of America's national security organization since the 1940s at the beginning of the Cold War. It's not coincidental since after 9/11 we understood that we were facing a very different threat to our national security and with an intensity that we had not yet faced to our homeland security.

So as I look back I want to thank you and your predecessors and the thousands of federal employees who work under you. Without question, because of what these three organizations have done, the American people have been much safer here at home than if you had not existed. So I want to extend my gratitude for what you have done. We've made a lot of progress and we've kept the enemy away for most of the last 11 years.

The most lethal threats attacks have been carried out by homegrown terrorists: Hasan at Fort Hood and Bledsoe at the Army recruiting station in Little Rock. The battle goes on, and its hard to reach a conclusion other than it'll go on for a long time.

We hold this hearing today still in mourning over the deaths of the American Ambassador to Libya, Chris Stevens, and three other State Department personnel. Speaking personally, I am infuriated by these attacks that resulted from a terrorist act against our consulate in Benghazi on the anniversary of the September 11th attacks.

This recent terrorist attack reminds us of the bravery of government officials who serve in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Egypt, working to support the struggles for freedom in these nations and by doing so, to improve our own national security.

The attack also reminds us that even though the core of Al Qaeda has been seriously weakened in the last few years, we still face threats from an evolving and fractious set of terrorist groups and individuals, united by a common ideology – that of violent Islamist extremism. And I'll have some questions to ask of you about the nature of the ter threat today specifically with reg to the reation to this film, whether tou think it has raised the threat level against any place ind or inst here in the US.

In examining the terrorist threat to the homeland today, I look forward to hearing from you on topics such as the status of efforts to counter homegrown violent Islamist extremism; the significance of the emergence of new jihadist groups in countries such as Egypt, Libya and Syria; and the threat to our homeland posed by Iran, the Quds force, and its proxy group Hezbollah, which seems to be reaching out of its normal area of operation, including the attempted assassination, which was thwarted, of the Saudi ambassador here in Washington and the recent bombing in Bulgaria.

I'd like to say a few words about cyber security, which has been a significant focus of the Committee this year. We know how serious the problem is. Enormous amounts of cyber espionage and cyber theft are going on, and there is increasing danger of a cyber attack. As you know the Cybersecurity Act of 2012, which was the compromise bypartisan legislation that made it to the Senate floor, has had problems getting enough votes to get taken up on the Senate floor. We worked for years with partners on both sides of the aisle. We had extensive consultations with private industry and of course we went to substantial lengths to find comond ground - including by making the standards voluntary and not mandartoy for private sector owners of cyber infrastructure.

But despite the magnitude of the threat as recognized by national security leaders from the past two administrations and both parties, the bill was filibustered on the Senate floor. Thus passed the best opportunity we've had to pass comprehensive cybersecurity legistlation. And of course all of you have said, perhaps Director Mueller most notatbly, that the threat of cyber attack will surpass the threat of terror attack.

I think it is obvious that we are not going to pass cybersecurity legislation before the election because we're leaving here in the next couple days but I think its possible and critical for Congress to pass such leglislation. But if the gridlock continues, as I fear it will, then the President and others in the Executive Branch should do everything within their power, as they are doing, to raise our defenses against cyber attack and cyber theft.

The fact is that today because of the inadequate defenses of America's privately owned critical cyber infrastructure, we are very vulnerable to a major cyber attack, perhaps a catastrophic cyber attack, well beyond what we suffered on 9/11.

I understand that executive action cannot do everything legislation can to protect us from cyber attack but it can do a lot. So far, we have failed to fix this problem and close our vulnerabilitie to cyber attack, and I hope the President will step in along with you, Secretary Napolitano, and act as strongly as you can to protect our country from these attacks.

So I want to thank you for being here. I look forward to this hearing every year. It's sometimes unsettling but it's important as a report to Congress and the people on the status of the threat to our homeland.