

Statement of Ranking Member Tom Carper
“Fifteen Years After 9/11: Threats to the Homeland”
September 27, 2016

As prepared for delivery:

Mr. Chairman, thank you. We hold this hearing today on the heels of terrorist attacks in Minnesota, New Jersey, and New York. Thanks to the hard work and dedication of law enforcement officials, those attackers were identified and stopped before they could fully carry out their plans. The vigilance and quick thinking of everyday citizens likely saved many lives, as well. That alone serves as an important reminder that--if we see something, we need to say something.

While the investigations into these attacks and their specific motives are still being determined, it's clear that these attacks were carried out by two men - two Americans, in fact - who spent most of their lives in our country. These attacks underscore a key fact, the fact that the greatest threat to our homeland doesn't come from overseas. It doesn't come from Syrian refugees or from those who travel as tourists on the Visa Waiver program. The greatest threat to our country now comes from within – from American citizens and legal residents who have spent most of their lives in this country. My colleagues and members of our staff may recall the words of renowned counter terrorism expert Peter Bergen who testified before this committee in November of last year when he said that, ‘Every person who's been killed by a jihadi terrorist in this country since 9/11 has been killed by an American citizen or resident.’

Think about that. Many of these attacks are being carried out by Americans, by people who have lived here their entire lives or came here as children. They grew up knowing nothing else but life in America. Yet some have suggested that the way to stop these attacks is for America to ban entire groups of people from traveling to our country. Banning entire religious groups from entering the country will not prevent attacks from people like those committed by Ahmad Rahami in New York and New Jersey or Dahir Aden in Minnesota. Rahami came here at the age of 7, and Aden at the age of 2. They grew up here as Americans. I believe that those who would seal America's doors to immigrants and refugees fundamentally misunderstand how to stop these homegrown attacks.

The reality is that stopping homegrown terrorism starts with reaching out to local communities, building stronger partnerships, and making the American dream accessible to all. Fortunately, the Department of Homeland Security is doing just this with its Office of Community Partnerships. I am proud that this committee passed a bill with bipartisan support to enhance the ability of the Department to work with the Muslim community and others in order to counter the violent messages of ISIS and other terrorist organizations. Another important way to battle homegrown terrorism is by neutralizing the terrorists who create the hateful propaganda that is radicalizing our fellow Americans. That's why it's important that we keep taking the fight to ISIS. Simply put, we must continue to defeat and destroy this horrible terrorist group. By doing so, we prevent ISIS from portraying itself as a winner, and we bring to light the horrible abuses it thrusts upon innocent people of every age, race, religion, and nationality. The 60-nation coalition that we lead has put ISIS on the verge of defeat in Iraq and Syria.

For instance, ISIS once held more than 34,000 square miles in Iraq and Syria—an area the size of Austria. Over the past two years, we've taken back more than 50 percent of the land once held in Iraq, and more than 20 percent in Syria. Additionally, we've taken more than 45,000 ISIS fighters off the battlefield and drastically cut ISIS funding by a third. And thanks in part to the diligent efforts of our witnesses and the agencies they represent; we've significantly slowed recruitment of foreigners by ISIS from a high of about 2,000 a month in 2014 to 50 a month today. Not that long ago, roughly ten Americans per month were among those leaving home to join forces with ISIS. Today, that number has dropped to less than one per month. This battle is not over, but it's now clear that ISIS's days in Iraq and Syria are numbered. We need to make it clearer every day that ISIS is not the winning team that they present themselves to be. All of us have a role to play in making that clear to the American people, especially those who are susceptible to ISIS' siren song.

As we all know, the violent attacks ISIS inspires are not the only threat to our homeland. We also face the real threat that hackers and foreign intelligence services can attack and steal from us with a few clicks of a keyboard. As the frequency and variety of cyberattacks continues to increase, Congress has a responsibility to work with the federal government and the private sector to ensure they have the resources to continue addressing this evolving threat. Only by staying a step ahead of the threat can we ensure the security of our country online. Recent cyberattacks on American political organizations and state election systems have raised concerns regarding the threat posed by foreign governments attempting to interfere with the political process in the United States. Elections are the foundation of our democracy. And given the steps taken by state and local governments to secure our election systems, the American people should have confidence that their votes cannot be undermined by malicious actors or bullies from abroad.

With that being said, I think we can all agree that there is always room to improve. And when it comes to cybersecurity, lots of help is available. I want to commend Secretary Johnson and Director Comey for moving quickly to make assistance available to state and local officials to enhance the security of their election systems. This assistance is completely voluntary, and I hope states take advantage.

I would like to conclude by thanking all of our witnesses for being here and for their service to our country. For some of you, this may be the last time you appear before this Committee. So if I may, I'd like to just take moment to especially recognize Secretary Johnson for his leadership of the Department of Homeland Security. Secretary Johnson, I'd also like to thank you for making management reform one of your top priorities. As we saw with the most recent Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey, your efforts, along with those of Deputy Secretary Mayorkas and your leadership team, to improve morale are really paying off. While there is still more work to be one, I would like to commend you and your team for the significant boost in morale at the Department and all the improvements that you have made during your tenure. As we say in the Navy, 'Bravo Zulu.' Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, I look forward to a productive hearing.