

Opening Statement
Ranking Member Rob Portman

U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY
& GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

“THREATS TO THE HOMELAND: EVALUATING THE LANDSCAPE 20 YEARS AFTER 9/11”

SEPTEMBER 21, 2021

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing. And thank you to our witnesses for attending.

We are here today, twenty years after the devastating attack of 9/11, to examine the evolution of the threat landscape since that fateful day.

In 2001, the Taliban provided a safe haven for al Qaeda in Afghanistan to launch a devastating attack on our homeland, killing 2,977 people.

The United States responded.

As our nation became all too aware, we needed to take the fight to the terrorists overseas so they could not bring their fight here ever again.

And we needed a new security architecture to keep us safe – which included the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and the recreation of this Committee as the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee.

To a large degree, we have been successful. We have not had a mass casualty foreign terrorist attack on American soil in 20 years.

The reason for that success is not because the terrorists have stopped trying. It is thanks to our armed forces, intelligence community, and law enforcement that we have succeeded in stopping them.

This hearing is timely. A little more than 20 days ago, the last American troops withdrew hastily from Afghanistan and the Taliban took back the government of Afghanistan.

The new Taliban looks very much like the old Taliban, with terrorists on the UN Security Council’s blacklist in its highest ranks. In fact, the leader of the Haqqani network, a US-designated terrorist organization which maintains close ties to Al Qaeda and cooperates with ISIS-K, was named the acting Interior Minister. That means the Taliban official in charge of combating terrorism is on the FBI’s most wanted list.

The CIA and the DIA already have moved up the timeline of when terror groups operating in Afghanistan could threaten the homeland from “possibly two years” to within one to two years. The DIA noted that is a conservative estimate. The CIA has already seen potential movement of al Qaeda into Afghanistan.

The catastrophic way the Biden administration withdrew from Afghanistan, surprising out NATO allies, abandoning our Afghan allies, has left us without eyes and ears on the ground. It also signaled to the world we are an unreliable partner.

The rushed and unplanned nature of the evacuation also resulted in too many left behind – some American citizens and green card holders – and many of the Afghans who had stood by us as drivers, interpreters, or NATO or UN workers. And because of the chaos at the Karzai airport, it appears that many who did get evacuated and admitted to the United States do not have a record of working with the U.S. government or our partners and are not being subject to normal security screening and vetting procedures.

We have a moral responsibility to welcome the Afghan evacuees who have had to flee their country because of the feckless actions of the Biden administration. We also have a moral responsibility to do everything in our power to ensure the safety and security of American citizens by not releasing terrorists and criminals into our communities.

I find it extraordinary that, despite my requests since September 1 – the day after the withdrawal, members of this Committee have yet to receive a classified briefing on vetting procedures even as we are told that evacuees are being resettled in our states.

Recent events have put the heightened foreign terrorist threat top of mind. In fact, the Director of National Intelligence stated that “terrorists remain interested in using chemical and biological agents in attacks against US interests and possibly the US homeland.”

The broader threat landscape, however, has evolved since 9/11.

We face an elevated terrorist threat from domestic and homegrown violent extremists, including lone actors.

We have experienced a slew of large-scale cyberattacks from both nation-states and criminals. Increasingly, the line between the two is blurred. Cybercriminals in countries like Russia frequently operate with the tacit blessing of the government, where, at a minimum, officials turn a blind eye to ongoing crimes.

And China continues to recruit U.S.-based scientists and researchers to transfer U.S. taxpayer-funded intellectual property for China's economic and military gain.

Furthermore, we cannot ignore the ongoing crisis at our southern border.

The Biden administration's decision to dismantle the previous administration's border policies with no consideration of the consequences has resulted in a historic surge of unlawful migrants, unaccompanied children, and deadly narcotics like fentanyl into our country. And make no mistake, the Mexican cartels are benefitting from this and gaining strength on both sides of the border.

The trafficking of dangerous drugs across our border has fueled an addiction epidemic that has hit communities in my home state of Ohio particularly hard with overdose deaths increasing over the last year after we had made so much progress in saving lives—we must redouble our efforts to stop these drugs from coming into our country.

It is clear that the border is a public health and humanitarian crisis.

Just look at Del Rio, Texas where more than 10,000 migrants, mostly Haitians who had been living in Latin America for years, have been living in squalor under a bridge.

It is also a national security threat. More than one in four migrants encountered at our border last month were not from Mexico or the Northern Triangle, a percentage that continues to increase. Nearly all of them avoided going to a port of entry and instead were apprehended by Border Patrol agents.

The Border Patrol has now made more than one million apprehensions of unlawful migrants at our southern border since President Biden was inaugurated.

So, we have a lot to talk about today. We have the right people here to talk about all of these issues, and I appreciate you being here—in person—to provide answers to the tough questions you will get from both sides of the aisle.

I look forward to a productive conversation about the current threats to our homeland and the actions being taken to prevent them.