

Opening Statement of
Ranking Member Senator Susan M. Collins

“The Future Terrorist Threat: An Evolving Landscape, A Determined Enemy”

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
September 22, 2010

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Nine years after the attacks of September 11, 2001, our government is challenged today by the evolving nature of the terrorist threat.

We know that terrorists revise their tactics to adapt to the security measures we have put in place. As we have made it more difficult for terrorists to come from abroad, we are seeing the development of a significant new threat that takes advantage of radicalized violent Islamist extremists within our borders. Foreign terrorist organizations are aggressively targeting these home-grown terrorists to carry out attacks. These homebased terrorists could decide to act independently – as “lone wolves” – motivated by terrorists’ propaganda but acting on their own.

To be sure, overall the United States is better prepared to confront the terrorist threat. Since 9/11, we have created new security and intelligence systems to detect, deter, and defend against terrorism – most notably through the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act that Senator Lieberman and I co-authored.

We expanded our intelligence gathering and information sharing systems. We erased bureaucratic barriers and silos. We learned to fight an enemy that wears no official uniform, that has no borders, and that represents no state in the traditional sense of the word.

The results have been significant. Terrorist plots, both at home and abroad, have been thwarted. But the threat has not been neutralized. Indeed, it is evolving and ever-changing. It is a chameleon by design.

Al Qaeda has extended its tentacles into regional terrorist organizations, causing threats to emanate from new places, like Yemen through the activities of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

AQAP and the radicalized American who has ties to that terrorist organization, Anwar al-Awlaki, were behind the attempt to detonate a bomb on a flight last Christmas Day and allegedly were the inspiration for U.S. Army psychiatrist Major Nidal Hasan's attack at Fort Hood.

This Committee sounded the alarm regarding homebased terrorism in 2006, when it held its first hearing on the threat of violent radicalization in our prison system. In all, Senator Lieberman and I have held 11 hearings on the issue.

Our investigation has predicted a potential wave of future terrorist activity in this country. We warned that individuals within the United States could be inspired by al Qaeda's violent ideology to plan and execute attacks, even if they do not receive direct orders from al Qaeda.

Unfortunately, our warnings proved to be prescient. In the past two years, our nation has seen an escalation in the number of terrorist attacks with roots based in our own country. In fact, the Congressional Research Service found that since May of last year, arrests were made in 19 plots by U.S. residents, compared to 21 plots during the seven and a half years from 9/11/01 to last May. That is an alarming increase.

On the eve of our nation's 9/11 commemorations, the National Security Preparedness Group, led by Lee Hamilton and Tom Kean, issued a timely report, "Assessing the Terrorist Threat."

The report said America continues to face serious threats from al Qaeda affiliates around the world ... and from homebased terrorists.

It warned of an increasingly wide range of "U.S.-based jihadist militants," who do not fit "any particular ethnic, economic, educational, or social profile."

It also sounded this grave warning:

"The American 'melting pot' has not provided a firewall against the radicalization and recruitment of American citizens and residents, though it has arguably lulled us into a sense of complacency that homegrown terrorism couldn't happen in the United States."

The Kean-Hamilton report called 2009 a watershed year in terrorist plots in the United States. In 2009 alone, at least 43 American citizens or

residents aligned with violent Islamist extremists were charged or convicted of terrorism crimes in the U.S. or elsewhere. And this year, to date, 20 have been similarly charged or convicted.

We also are seeing the terrorist threat morph into another stage of development. While we must still remain focused on catastrophic, spectacular attacks on the scale of 9/11, I am convinced that terrorists are beginning to focus their efforts on small-scale attacks with small-arms and explosives, as we saw at Fort Hood, in Arkansas, and in Mumbai, India.

We must see the disparate attacks and changing tactics for what they are – separate parts of a more dangerous pattern.

The past two years have taught us, through harsh lessons, that we must increase our efforts. As the Kean-Hamilton report observed: “It is fundamentally troubling” that there remains no federal government agency or department specifically charged with identifying radicalization and interdicting the recruitment of U.S. citizens or residents for terrorism.

We must redouble our efforts to better anticipate, analyze, and prepare. We must address what is quickly becoming a daunting and highly challenging crisis. This dangerous reality must be met with better security measures, innovative community outreach, and enhanced information-sharing. Most of all, we cannot risk another failure of imagination.

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