

**Opening Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins**

Ten Years After 9/11: Preventing Terrorist Travel

**Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
July 13, 2011**

★ ★ ★

Limiting the travel of terrorists is a key way to protect our country. As the 9-11 Commission put it: “targeting travel is at least as powerful a weapon against terrorists as targeting their money.”

According to the 9-11 Commission’s report on Terrorist Travel, as many as 15 of the 19 hijackers might have been intercepted by border authorities if a procedure had been in place to share intelligence data.

At the time, however, threat information sharing systems and policies were largely absent, and the hijackers’ past terrorist associations were not readily available to American officials who could have acted.

Today, we have a more rigorous system at high-risk consulates to help identify those who should not receive visas. But we need to upgrade the Visa Security Program so it can operate effectively and in more high-risk posts.

This program deploys additional Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents to our high-risk embassies and consulates overseas to help identify suspected terrorists and criminals *before* visas are issued.

The problem is, the U.S. has these offices at only 19 posts, yet there are 57 high-risk posts. The GAO also has found ongoing turf battles between ICE and the State Department’s Diplomatic Security at some posts.

VSP must implement effective procedures to help DHS and State Department agents resolve questions about who should—and who shouldn’t—receive a visa to come to our country. All of those involved in the visa process at these high-risk embassies should be rowing in the same direction for the program to reach its potential.

There are other serious challenges and gaps in our security. Recently, we learned that terrorists intent on attacking America have shown interest in having explosive devices surgically implanted in their bodies.

Yet, a young man was able to fly cross-country from New York to Los Angeles without a valid government ID and with an expired boarding pass that was not even in his name. And at the other extreme, it troubles many Americans to see the TSA putting the very young and the very elderly through intrusive, and in most cases unnecessary, pat-downs.

If we continue to give extra screening to individuals who pose no threat, yet others who should arouse suspicion can bypass check points without being questioned, our systems are still not properly calibrated.

As Senator Paul will discuss and as Republican Leader McConnell has highlighted, we also need to scrutinize the criteria for granting asylum.

In May, two Iraqi refugees living in Kentucky were indicted on federal terrorism charges. One of the men “allegedly carried out numerous improvised explosive device attacks against U.S. troops in Iraq,” and the other also allegedly was an insurgent.

That they were permitted come to this country on humanitarian grounds is shocking.

How could this happen when there was sufficient evidence of the terrorist attacks to indict them?

What is being done to close this serious vulnerability?

Is the Administration re-analyzing the backgrounds of other refugees granted asylum under what appears to be a flawed process?

Even with improvements in our own safeguards, the U.S. cannot go it alone. Enhancing the capacity of other nations is a critical pillar supporting the strategy of combating terrorist travel.

A new GAO report, that I requested, provides an update on progress toward that goal. While the U.S. has many programs to help our partner nations improve their visa issuance and screening protocols, the GAO has found that too often these programs are not coordinated.

GAO also found redundancies. In one case, GAO discovered that in Pakistan, State and DHS were both planning to hold fraudulent travel document training for the same Pakistani agency during the same month without knowing of the other's plans.

These programs also do not focus sufficiently on corruption in the passport issuance process overseas, which, according to the GAO, is a significant obstacle in our efforts to keep terrorists from traveling.

There is some encouraging news. DHS reports that nearly 450 suspected terrorists have been identified on the watch list and blocked from boarding overseas flights bound for the U.S in fiscal years 2010 and 2011.

CBP is now matching passenger manifests with the terrorist watch list, and not just the “no fly” list. It is vital to review these lists before departure, not once the plane is airborne.

Terrorists constantly probe our defenses and innovate. We must never cease our efforts to keep terrorists from acquiring the documents and means to travel to our shores.

#