

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

“Ten Years After 9/11: Are We Safer?”

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

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The State of Maine became forever linked to the attacks of September 11th, 2001, when two of the hijackers, Mohammed Atta and Abdulaziz al Omari boarded an early morning flight to Boston at the Portland Jetport. From Logan Airport, they set in motion the worst terrorist attack in our nation’s history by seizing control of American Airlines Flight 11.

That evening, Members of Congress came together on the steps of the Capitol to express unity. A day that began with shock and anger ended with unity and resolve.

We resolved to ensure our country had the tools to deter and detect future plots and to identify those who would do us harm. When Chairman Lieberman and I authored the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004, our goal was to create a strong leader to coordinate the 17 separate agencies of the Intelligence Community and to change their culture from “need to know” to “need to share” so that next time the dots would be connected in time to stop an attack.

The operation that killed Osama bin Laden represented the kind of successful collaboration of intelligence and operations that we envisioned. Information is now being shared more effectively, both across the federal government and among federal agencies and their state, local, and tribal partners.

Just last week, DHS and the FBI announced a “specific, credible but unconfirmed threat” related to the 9/11 anniversary. The Administration is taking this threat seriously and shared intelligence with state and local enforcement officials in the targeted locations and with others across the country.

Thankfully, there was not an incident over the weekend. But we must consider whether this particular threat has truly passed and for how long we should remain on heightened alert.

This threat demonstrates yet again that the terrorists have not abandoned their quest to harm our country and continue to probe for vulnerabilities.

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Much has changed in the past decade. We have vastly improved the sharing of information across agencies at the federal level and with state and local emergency and law enforcement professionals.

Joint Terrorism Task Forces are now based in 106 cities nationwide. JTTF personnel come from more than 600 state and local agencies and 50 federal agencies.

State-based fusion centers have established a two-way street with our federal partners and our first responders, who are likely to be the first to observed suspicious activity.

In the case of last week's terrorist threat, the decision to publicize the threat put millions of eyes and ears on the lookout for suspicious behavior on the eve of the September 11th commemoration.

Senator Lieberman and I continue to work to expand the "See Something, Say Something" law. Our bill would provide further protection against lawsuits for citizens who report suspicious behavior indicating potential terrorist activity.

When it comes to our homeland security, we are, however, only as strong as our weakest link. As we saw in 2009, with the Christmas Day bomber and Major Hasan's attack on Fort Hood, when information is not shared and when warning signals are ignored or overlooked, our security is placed at risk.

The TSA has strengthened airline passenger screening. Nevertheless, a young man was recently able to fly cross-country without a valid ID and with an expired boarding pass that was not even in his name.

Similarly, the Department of Homeland Security has bolstered the security of U.S. borders and identification documents, yet two Iraqi refugees with ties to al Qaeda were arrested in Kentucky for allegedly helping to carry out attacks against our troops.

How a known bomb maker, whose fingerprints we had had for years, was able to enter our country on humanitarian grounds remains an unanswered and troubling question. It appears, however, that this case may reflect the lack of imagination that the 9/11 Commission found to be a persistent failure. While the FBI's analysis of IEDs collected in Iraq and Afghanistan has undoubtedly helped U.S. warfighters, the forensic information being collected from these devices should also be used to screen those seeking to enter our country.

We must ask: Are there other Iraqi nationals granted asylum who were involved in attacking our troops? I know the Administration is reviewing the

files of the more than 51,000 Iraqi's admitted under this refugee program, but it is deeply troubling that we still await clear answers from the Administration.

Homegrown terrorism is another evolving threat that continues to challenge us. This Committee first sounded the alarm about home-based terrorism five years ago and has held more than a dozen hearings on the topic.

Over the past two years, 31 arrests were made in "homegrown" plots by American citizens or legal permanent residents, an enormous increase compared to the previous seven years dating back to 2001. Yet, the Administration's strategy for countering violent Islamist extremism is insufficient to meet the threat.

We shall never forget those we lost on September 11th, 2001. As has been noted often, the terrorists only have to get it right once; we have to be right every time or suffer the consequences of an attack. We are much safer than we were a decade ago, but we must be relentless in anticipating the changing tactics of terrorists. As the successful decade-long search for Osama bin Laden proved, America's resolve is the most powerful weapon against those who seek to destroy our way of life.

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