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Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson

Al Shabaab: Recruitment and Radicalization within the Muslim American Community and the Threat to the Homeland

July 27, 2011 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the full Committee hearing entitled “Al Shabaab: Recruitment and Radicalization within the Muslim American Community and the Threat to the Homeland”:

“Today, this committee will hold the third hearing in its series on terrorism and the American Muslim community. In previous hearings, we have heard testimony about young Americans of Somali descent who left this country to join Al Shabaab -- a Somali group that has been designated a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the Department of State.

Our discussion of Al Shabaab and America must begin with the facts. Reliable evidence indicates:

- A small but concerning number of young men have left America to join this group.
- This activity seemed to occur primarily between 2007 and 2009.
- Al Shabaab has fewer than 3,000 members.
- Al Shabaab has never attacked the United States or U.S. interests abroad.

There are other facts we must not ignore. Somalia is currently in the grips of the worse humanitarian crisis in a generation. Against Somalia’s backdrop of human suffering caused by natural disaster is the political instability caused by human folly. Somalia has not had a stable government since 1991. It has long been ruled by family groups and clans.

Unfortunately, Al Shabaab is one ingredient in this toxic and tragic mix.

While I acknowledge that the intelligence community sees a need to monitor Al Shabaab’s activities, I also know that vigilance must be in direct proportion to the probability and likelihood of the threat. Al Shabaab does not appear to present any danger to this homeland.

At the same time, we must wonder whether Americans who joined Al Shabaab would return to this country and commit acts of terrorism. I think that is a fair question that deserves a factual answer. A few people have been convicted in the U.S. for providing support and assistance to Al Shabaab.

Many of the young men who were recruited by Al Shabaab have been indicted. Most remain fugitives in Somalia. Some have been killed. But what of the others?

When they return from Somalia what will await them here? As members of this committee know, we cannot discuss methods in an open forum. But it is fair to say that most of these people will be identified and apprehended long before they touch down on American soil.

We must also wonder how we can stop young Somali Americans from joining Al Shabaab. The Democratic witness will give a boots-on-the-ground perspective on how we can promote inclusion of new immigrant communities, decrease alienation and undermine radicalization.

The threat of Al Shabaab radicalizing young Americans is a problem we can constructively address.

Today marks the third time that this committee has taken up alleged links between terrorism and the American Muslim community. Before these hearings began, I requested that their focus be broadened to include a look at the real and present threat of domestic violent extremism. Those requests were rebuffed.

At our first hearing on this subject, uprisings had begun throughout North Africa and the Middle East. At that time, I cautioned that we remember how our words reverberate beyond this room. It bears repeating today.

Last week, in Norway, a domestic terrorist fueled by anti-Islamic ideology waged a multi-phased terrorist attack that included bombing federal buildings and shooting children point-blank at a summer camp for future national leaders. This lone wolf extremist killed nearly 80 people in his anti-Islamic fervor.

It is too early to say what the people of Norway will take from this horrific national tragedy. But for me, this incident makes plain that the madness of terrorism cannot be neatly confined to any one religion, one people or one nation. Let me repeat what I said before we began. This committee needs to examine the threat from lone wolves in our midst.”

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