

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson*****From al-Shabaab to al-Nusra: How Westerners Joining Terror Groups Overseas Affect the Homeland***

March 13, 2013 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the full Committee hearing entitled “From al-Shabaab to al-Nusra: How Westerners Joining Terror Groups Overseas Affect the Homeland”:

“The purpose of this hearing is to explore the possibility that American citizens may leave this country to join terrorist groups fighting in areas of unrest overseas and return home to use tactics learned abroad to launch attacks within the United States.

We should state at the outset that Customs and Border Protection currently operates an Immigration Advisory Program (IAP). IAP officers work in partnership with foreign law enforcement officials to identify terrorists and other high-risk passengers, and then work in coordination with commercial air carriers to prevent these individuals from boarding flights destined for the United States. Since the inception of the program in 2004, IAP officers have been successful in preventing the boarding of more than 15,700 high-risk and improperly documented passengers. So, while no system is perfect, we can take some comfort in knowing that we have a system in place that seems to be working.

Mr. Chairman, I understand that in addition to an examination of foreign terrorist groups, this hearing will examine the vulnerability of soft targets within the United States. There is concern that if individuals are able to slip back into this country, they may be most likely to attack soft targets within our borders.

As we have recently witnessed, a seemingly well organized terrorist group attacked a mall—a soft target—in Kenya, killing over 70 people. That group—Al Shabaab—has a large presence in Kenya and neighboring Somalia. Until the mall attack, Al Shabaab had many sympathizers in Kenya. I am sure that the attack on Westgate Mall will cause the Kenyan people to reconsider their support. Regardless of its fate in Kenya, we know that Al Shabaab does not have a large following here. And I doubt that the massacre of innocent men, women and children at a mall will likely garner new followers in America.

Recently, we have seen our share of violent attacks waged against innocent people who happened to be at soft target locations. But those attacks have not been carried out by large groups.

We have witnessed the bombing of the Boston Marathon. The motivation of the Boston bombing suspects remains unknown. While one of the suspects engaged in foreign travel, the purpose of his trips remains unclear. It appears that the suspects were not involved with any foreign terrorist organization. They learned to build the bombs they used from information gathered on the Internet through publicly available websites.

Mr. Chairman, it seems that the Boston Marathon bombing has turned all the conventional wisdom about violent extremism upside-down and confirmed that people do not need to travel abroad to learn violent and destructive behavior. Violent extremists can be homegrown.

Mr. Chairman, as you know, I have repeatedly called upon this committee to review acts of domestic

violent extremist—particularly those people who may act alone. While we have seen Boston, we have also seen a shopping center in Arizona, a movie theater in Colorado and a school in Connecticut.

Those tragic events should not be ignored or forgotten in our consideration of the possibility of soft target attacks. As we develop a policy-driven response to the vulnerability of soft targets, the most likely scenarios must be considered. And in this country, the most likely scenario involves a lone actor.

Also, as we consider how soft target attacks affect the homeland, I would suggest that we think about the fact that most of these locations are privately-owned. I do not know of many malls or movie theatres that welcome the addition of armed guards. I know of even fewer that would want the federal government to require the kinds of barriers and other security measures we see in federal buildings.

While the federal government should not pay for these improvements to private businesses, I would think that the security community would welcome a joint discussion to share information on best practices. The federal government need not fund these efforts, but the government can provide an open forum for the exchange of ideas that will keep us all safer without compromising our privacy or civil liberties.

If we want to proactively encourage these kinds of security measures in soft targets, we need to think about the role of federal funding in assisting the states and local jurisdictions address the soft targets in their midst.

Mr. Chairman, as you know, the Federal government plays an integral role in funding homeland security efforts of the states. Stakeholders from state and local jurisdictions have repeatedly testified before this committee that the homeland security grant funds have been essential in developing the capabilities necessary to quickly and effectively respond to a terrorist attack or natural disaster.

Indeed, at this Committee's hearing on the Boston Marathon Bombings in May, Boston Police Commissioner Davis stated that without grant funding, the "response would have been much less comprehensive than it was" and without the exercises supported through federal grant funding, "there would be more people who had died...in these attacks."

Unfortunately, the funding for the Homeland Security Grant Program has been reduced significantly under Republican leadership of the House—from \$2.75 billion to \$1.5 billion. And the sequester cuts will further erode funding. Neither the grant funding levels nor the sequester cuts are particularly relevant today. The government is shut down and the grants that make soft targets less vulnerable are not getting to the states and localities. The training exercises that could have been conducted or the equipment which could have been purchased will have to wait. The discussions that could have been held between the business community and its federal partners have been put on hold because the government is closed.

In addition to the funding provided by these federal grant programs, the Director of National Intelligence had indicated that the government shutdown may seriously damage our ability to protect the safety and security of this nation and its citizens because about 70 percent of the Intelligence Community's staff has been furloughed.

Further, Mr. Chairman, I should note that we are able to have today's hearing although there are no witnesses from the federal government. While the absence of the federal government may be advantageous for your ability to convene today's hearing, our understanding of the issues raised here today and our potential legislative or oversight response can only be effective if we have the benefit of testimony from those federal employees who are responsible for administering the programs that keep this nation safe. But those people cannot testify here today because they are on furlough due to the shutdown. I look forward to hearing from those federal employees, and I look forward to their return to work."

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