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Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

Shutting Down Terrorist Pathways into America

September 14, 2016

Three days ago, we paused to honor the memory of those who lost their lives on September 11, 2001. After those horrific attacks on American soil 15 years ago, we committed ourselves as a nation to be resilient and to ensure terror would not rule our days. The aftermath of those attacks led to the formation of the Department of Homeland Security.

In large part because of that decision, the Federal government has strengthened its ability to detect and thwart terrorist threats and has improved information sharing between Federal, State, and local partners. Our government has more advanced overseas intelligence capabilities and more stringent vetting processes for foreigners entering our country.

The Department has been agile and able to respond and make necessary policy changes to remain secure when humanitarian crises arose or security vulnerabilities were exposed.

However, the Department's agility is limited by the dysfunctional jurisdictional webs in the House and Senate. I look forward to continuing a bipartisan effort with the Chairman to give DHS what the 9/11 Commissioners recommended over ten years ago—"a single, principal point of oversight and review for homeland security."

Despite our nation's layered approach to security, September 11th was not the last terrorist attack we have had on American soil and certainly not the last attempted attack. Most recently, attacks in Orlando and Charleston, and the attempted attack in Garland, Texas, have illustrated that the terrorist threat has changed.

Potential terrorists do not have to leave our borders, undergo training in another country, and return to the United States to commit attacks. Terrorist attacks do not have to be financed by or conducted at the direction of a terrorist group or a particular leader. Today, potential terrorists can be inspired by propaganda and rhetoric spewed over the Internet.

But the Internet is not only avenue to radicalization. Charged rhetoric in public forums has fueled the proliferation of both domestic and foreign-inspired terrorist organizations. As DHS Secretary Johnson indicated last weekend, our government is able to connect the dots associated with overseas terrorist-directed plots on our homeland. However, we need to be vigilant about lone actors—people who are self-radicalized and may not appear on a particular watchlist or be flagged at the border.

In response to this evolution in the terrorist threat, the Department and its Federal partners have renewed its focus on “countering violent extremism”. DHS created the Office of Community Partnerships, chairs the Interagency CVE Task Force, and has established community-based grants to counter violent extremism.

The Department is pursuing all these efforts and Congress is appropriating funds for these activities; however, DHS has not issued a CVE strategy or transmitted an implementation plan to Congress.

Moreover, the written testimony today and previous statements by the Secretary give the impression that DHS CVE programs may be designed to focus singularly on one ideology and engaging one community.

The threat landscape is ever-evolving. It would be a shame to, in the words of the 9/11 Commission, suffer from a “failure of imagination” about what ideology or what group could be behind an attempted attack on the United States because we had a myopic view of the threat to our nation.

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