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Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson

The Evolving Terrorist Threat—Nine Years after the 9/11 Attacks

September 15, 2010 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the full Committee hearing entitled “The Evolving Terrorist Threat—Nine Years after the 9/11 Attacks”:

“September 11, 2001 was a day that changed America. 3,000 innocent people lost their lives in the most horrific attack on American soil. The attack was perpetrated by Al Qaeda, a group that most Americans, at the time, did not know existed.

On those early days that followed the shock and pain of the attacks, we, as Americans, came together in an unprecedented fashion and made vows to our country, our neighbors, and the victims of the heinous attacks.

We vowed that we would remain resilient. We vowed to do what it takes to prevent an attack of this magnitude from happening again. We recommitted ourselves to respecting religious freedom.

Nine years later, we have honored some of those vows with high regard. We honored our vow to be resilient.

A great example came this past May, when the people of Manhattan illustrated great vigilance and strength by preventing a terrorist attack in Times Square and then, in short order, getting back to work.

We have honored our vow to take steps to help prevent an attack of this magnitude from happening again by reorganizing much of the Federal homeland security and intelligence bureaucracy.

We created the Department of Homeland Security. We established the Director of National Intelligence and reformed the Intelligence Community.

I am not, by any means, saying that those endeavors were a complete success but there were done in the spirit of honoring that vow.

Regrettably, one vow which some have shamefully and very publicly broken over the past few weeks is our vow to maintain respect for religious freedom.

Just as we must stand vigilant against the threat of terrorism so too must we stay vigilant against those who would seek to sow hate and divide us along religious or ethnic lines.

I am reminded of the words of then-President Bush, just six days after the 9/11 attacks, who, standing before religious leaders at the Islamic Center of Washington, stated, “the face of terror is not the true faith of Islam.”

Those words were echoed this past weekend by President Obama, at an event commemorating the ninth anniversary of the attacks when he said, “As Americans we are not at war with Islam.”

Reports of Americans being harmed just because they practice Islam are not only shameful but distract from the real threats to this nation.

Al Qaeda has a stake in “a divided America.” Propaganda is the life-blood of Al Qaeda. They need outrageous conduct and statements of the sort that we have seen in recent days to fuel their recruitment efforts.

Importantly, the assessment produced by our witnesses challenges the lies that some have tried to spread about people of certain ethnicities or religions being terrorists. It reveals that the face of “homegrown terrorism” is a diverse one.

In 2009 alone, they report that 21% were Caucasian, 9% were Black, and 4% were Hispanic. The report also finds that homegrown terrorists were just as likely to be educated and prosperous as illiterate and poor.

Another noteworthy observation is that in the nine years since 9/11, Al Qaeda and its affiliates have been able to infiltrate our culture.

In fact, the assessment finds that more and more of their leaders and followers are Americans and that an “embryonic terrorist recruitment, radicalization, and operational infrastructure” has taken root within our borders.

Al Qaeda has been able to do so by using one of America’s strengths—the “Melting Pot of values, ideas, and backgrounds”—to their advantage.

The fruits of this effort have been the radicalization of recruits who know American culture because they have lived it.

The magnitude of the “homegrown threat” must be given due consideration at all levels of government. One question for our witnesses and for our nation is what can we do to counter this insidious terrorist threat? Hopefully, our witnesses can give us some answers to this growing problem. One thing is for sure, stereotyping and fear-mongering are certainly not the answers.”

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