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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

September 12, 2011

The Honorable John Brennan
Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and
Counterterrorism and Deputy National Security Advisor
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. Brennan:

We write to provide our views on the Administration's recent framework for countering domestic radicalization: "Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States" (the "Framework").

We thank the Administration for issuing the Framework. It is an important step toward organizing and integrating the federal government's activities against the threat of homegrown terrorism. Nevertheless, we are sorry to say we find this report ultimately to be disappointing. The Framework does not explicitly identify the enemy as violent Islamist extremism, lacks key elements of an effective strategy such as identifying a lead agency, does not adequately address engagement with Muslim-American communities, glosses over the role of the Internet, and has not yet developed rigorous counterterrorism training standards.

Countering the grave and growing threat from homegrown Islamist extremists is a particular concern of ours. Over the past five years, our Committee has held more than a dozen hearings on this challenge to our nation's security. We have also issued a staff report detailing the use of the Internet for radicalization: *Violent Islamist Extremism, the Internet and the Homegrown Terrorist Threat*; and an investigative report assessing the Fort Hood attack: *A Ticking Time Bomb: Counterterrorism Lessons from the U.S. Government's Failure to Prevent the Fort Hood Attack*. Our staff has received many briefings, interviewed hundreds of government and nongovernment counterterrorism experts, met with Muslim community leaders throughout the country, and travelled overseas to learn about our foreign partners' counter-radicalization efforts.

Our work on this threat has convinced us we need to do more. Since 2008, we have called for a national strategy for countering radicalization domestically. Five months ago, as part of our inquiry into the status of the government's efforts to counter the domestic radicalization threat, we sent letters to you and the heads of eight agencies asking what specific steps were

being taken to counter the growing threat.[1] It was our hope that our requests would bring forth a clear and coordinated plan for combating homegrown Islamist radicalization.

The lack of progress represented by the Framework is particularly frustrating because we do not believe time is on our side. The possibility domestic Islamist extremists will gain access to more dangerous weapons made of radiological materials, chemical warfare agents, dangerous pathogens, or cyber-attack technologies is a real one.

We urge the Administration to complete an implementation plan, including a budget, as soon as possible. Since the attacks of 9/11, our government has done much to bolster our security against terrorist attacks from abroad. But the threat is changing, and we now need a strategy to better meet that new threat and secure the home front.

Our specific criticisms are outlined below:

Identifying the Threat

Our enemy has a distinct ideology, and that ideology has a name: violent Islamist extremism. The Framework, however, refuses to state this clearly. First, it says that we are at war with "al-Qa'ida and its affiliates and adherents" and later more generally talks about countering "violent extremism."

The first term is too narrow – and the second too broad.

Narrowing the threat to followers of al-Qa'ida ignores the wider violent Islamist extremist movement of which al-Qa'ida is only a part and risks focusing our counterterrorism strategy on an organization rather than the ideology. Al-Qa'ida is not the unifying force behind the threat and, even if it were completely rooted out tomorrow, the ideology of violent Islamist extremism would continue to threaten the homeland.

But characterizing the threat as "violent extremism" is far too broad. This vague term is never defined and could cover a range of ideologies that, while capable of causing harm, do not pose the preeminent threat to our national security today that Islamist extremism does.

Violent Islamist extremism has a particular – if twisted – message that must be understood and countered. The clearly stated goal of the Islamists is to establish a caliphate, or empire, within the Arab and Muslim world that would overthrow existing governments and impose upon the people a harsh and radical interpretation of *Shari'ah* (Islamic religious law). They claim that the United States and the world's liberal democracies are at war with this version of Islam and teach that a devout Muslim who lives in the West is justified in putting aside family, friends, citizenship and residence to attack civilian or military targets in the country where he or she resides.

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[1] Copies of the letters to the Departments of Homeland Security, Commerce, Health and Human Services, Education, Justice, Labor, and the Treasury and to the National Counterterrorism Center are available at http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=Home.Correspondence.

U.S. citizens arrested for plotting attacks in this country repeatedly cite this narrative as a justification for their actions, and any plan to counter the Islamist radicals has to start by targeting precisely the enemy's propaganda.

By failing to call our enemy by its true name, we also miss the opportunity to distinguish the political beliefs of violent Islamist extremism from the peaceful religion of Islam. As the "Arab Spring" has shown, most Muslims aspire to build more open and democratic societies and that makes them the enemies of the Islamists. Indeed, violent Islamist extremists have killed more Muslims than any other religious group.[2]

Clearly defining our enemies as Islamist extremists is also essential in helping to educate Americans about Islam and in protecting Muslim-Americans from suspicion based merely on the practice of their religion.

Developing a True Strategy

The Framework lacks the essential elements of a strategy as defined by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in a circular issued in 2010.[3] There is no mission statement. Roles and responsibilities are not assigned to any agencies or individuals. And there are no stated strategic goals, performance goals or timelines, nor evaluation methods to measure performance. The Framework also lacks resource and budget estimates.

As a result, we are concerned that this document will have little practical impact toward improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the government's efforts to meet the threat of homegrown Islamist extremists.

We appreciate your response to our previous letters that the "National Security Council [NSC] serves as the principal venue for coordinating the development and implementation of policies."[4] But the NSC is a committee of cabinet secretaries chaired by the President. Obviously the President does not have time to lead our nation's counter-radicalization efforts on a daily basis. If the group of relevant cabinet secretaries is supposed to take the lead, then we are concerned that "if everyone is in charge, no one is in charge."

If your letter meant that the National Security Staff (NSS) is assuming leadership, then we question the basis for the NSS's authority and are concerned that accountability for this critical mission is placed with a body led by officials who are not serving in statutorily-created roles, confirmed by the Senate, and subject to Congressional oversight – which is crucial to ensure these programs are operating effectively.

As you know from your decades of successful leadership of numerous organizations, without these key elements in place, agencies will be adrift trying to individually implement a

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[2] Combating Terrorist Center, *Deadly Vanguards: A Study of al-Qa'ida's Violence Against Muslims*, December 1, 2009.

[3] Office and Management and Budget, Executive Office of the President, The White House, *Preparation and Submission of Strategic Plans, Annual Performance Plan, and Annual Program Performance Reports*, Circular A-11, July 2010.

[4] Letter from John Brennan to Senator Joseph I. Lieberman, May 9, 2011.

high-level strategy and our efforts will be uncoordinated and ineffective. We know that you recognize these concerns, and from staff briefings[5] we understand that an implementation plan will be completed within six months of the release of the Framework. We are, however, concerned that it will then take many more months for resources to be identified and budgeted. Furthermore, without an implementation plan, Congress cannot evaluate its effectiveness or make clear budgetary decisions in this difficult economic climate.

Specific plans responding to Islamist extremist threats to our national security need to be prepared swiftly and implemented aggressively. Time is not on our side.

Engaging Muslim-American Communities

We commend the Framework's focus on the need for continued engagement with Muslim-American communities and agree with its statement that "communities are best placed to recognize and confront the threat."

We believe this engagement should have three objectives: (1) provide information to Muslim-American communities about the warning signs of Islamist radicalization as well as basic information concerning law enforcement in their communities, with a focus on addressing any perception of discriminatory treatment or arrests; (2) encourage those Muslim-Americans who participate in engagement activities to work with their neighbors who do not on ways to spot an individual's radicalization and the steps that can be taken to intervene and counter the Islamist message; and (3) hear concerns from these communities regarding particular counterterrorism activities, for instance airport screening, and make sure they know the rationale behind these procedures and what their rights are.

Following a staff review of federally-sponsored meetings with Muslim communities in Los Angeles, CA; Minneapolis, MN; Seattle, WA; Virginia; and Washington, DC, we are concerned that present engagement activities are not adequately coordinated or sustained.[6] Our survey found that the government's activities tend to be either large meetings attended by a wide variety of federal officials or large meetings sponsored by individual government agencies pursuing their own specific interest. Either way, large meetings tend to overwhelm attendees and are often one-time or infrequent events.

The federal government should examine systematically whether the manner in which it conducts engagement is the most effective and efficient approach in achieving these objectives. At the very least, the federal government needs to better integrate the range of activities across its various agencies – including the Departments of Homeland Security and Justice as well as Labor, Health and Human Services, and others. Basic coordination mechanisms such as a common calendar of events could help, and metrics are needed to track progress and show where improvement is needed.

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[5] Interagency Briefing to U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Staff, June 21, 2011.

[6] U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Staff, *Survey of Muslim American Community Engagement*, August 2011 (internal report).

We recommend a series of smaller, ongoing meetings in each community, and that such meetings cover a variety of topics of potential interest to these communities – for instance community concerns about their interactions with government at all levels. Violent Islamist extremism should be just one topic covered. In these ways, a strong and trusting relationship would be built over time and show that the government cares about these communities beyond just security interests. A strong, public relationship between the government and Muslim-American communities will, by itself, help deter radicalization because it will make Islamists feel alone and exposed in these communities.

We also need to create programs outside of law enforcement to deal with those becoming radicalized but who have committed no crime. As we noted in our report on the Fort Hood attack, if the accused killer, Major Nidal Hasan, had in fact been discharged from the Army prior to November 5, 2009, there was no system in place to deal with his increasingly violent tendencies. This is a critical gap that must be filled for any counter-radicalization strategy to be successful.

Countering Radicalization on the Internet

In 2008, our Committee issued a report entitled "Violent Islamist Extremism, the Internet and the Homegrown Terrorist Threat." It concluded saying:

"No longer is the threat just from abroad, as was the case with the attacks of September 11, 2001; the threat is now increasingly from within, from homegrown terrorists who are inspired by violent Islamist ideology to plan and execute attacks where they live. One of the primary drivers of this new threat is the use of the Internet to enlist individuals or groups of individuals to join the cause without ever affiliating with a terrorist organization. As this homegrown terrorist threat evolves, so too must our response."

That was three years ago and we have made little progress since in addressing this global propaganda venue, while the Islamist extremists are constantly expanding their web presence. Once confined to a handful of password-protected Internet forums and sporadic web sites, Islamist extremists are now skilled at using social network platforms, like Facebook and YouTube, to spread their message and target recruits. This is particularly true for American recruits, whose familiarity with social networking sites has led them to radicalize where they are most comfortable – sites that did not even rate a mention in our report at the time.

We are frustrated that the Framework does not adequately address the role of the Internet in recruitment, radicalization, and mobilization of U.S. citizens because, as our report documented, time after time it has been the main conduit for lone-wolf terrorists and small Islamist cells here in America to receive indoctrination and training. Even the most successful engagement strategy will fail to reach these kinds of individuals who are disengaged and find encouragement and validation for radicalization online.

In order to reach such "lone wolves" before they are fully radicalized and ready to attack, the government needs to have a meaningful strategy for countering radicalization on the Internet. We recommend that the forthcoming implementation plan have an appendix devoted specifically

to countering online radicalization. This strategy should include plans to encourage the private sector to aid the numerous Muslim-American groups and community leaders who oppose Islamist extremism in setting up and maintaining their own professional-quality Internet platforms to counter the terrorist message.

We understand that tension continues within the Executive Branch between the need to reduce terrorist propaganda online and the necessity for obtaining the actionable intelligence that can be derived from these web platforms.[7] But these two goals are not mutually exclusive and – with decisive leadership and careful coordination – can enable one another.

Ensuring Appropriate Training

We applaud the Administration's call in the Framework for rigorous standards for counterterrorism trainers. As our Fort Hood investigation found, appropriate training is essential. Major Nidal Hasan was allowed to continue through his Army service in part because his commanding officers and fellow soldiers were not trained in the distinct difference between the religion of Islam and the violent political ideology of Islamist extremism.[8] Some of Hasan's commanders did not understand that the view he was espousing was not Islam but rather a warning sign of a man on the path towards violence.

An initial review by our staff revealed that agencies providing grants to state and local law enforcement lack meaningful standards for their counterterrorism curriculum and an adequate vetting process for individual trainers. For instance, the Department of Homeland Security's review of training curriculum is performed by an outside contractor, rather than by the Department, and the Department refused to disclose the participants of the third-party curriculum review panels when asked by our staff in a request for voluntary production of the information.[9]

In addition, state and local law enforcement often have little or no guidance from the federal government on what counterterrorism training should entail. The result has been cases of trainers spewing inaccurate or even bigoted information to state and local law enforcement personnel, stigmatizing Muslim-Americans generally, and in effect, lending support to the false narrative that we are "at war" with Islam. As we have stated in previous letters to this Administration, we have serious concerns that improper training may not be isolated occurrences and could be detrimental to our efforts to confront homegrown terrorism. Since Muslim-Americans are our main allies in the fight against violent Islamist extremism domestically, any training that implies otherwise is both inaccurate and counterproductive.

Agencies themselves must carefully vet and control the training curricula. If the Administration cannot develop criteria for training quickly, then we will consider drafting a legislative mandate or even imposing standards by statute.

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[7] Washington Post, *Dismantling of Saudi-CIA Web site illustrates need for clearer cyberwar policies*, March 19, 2010.

[8] U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, *A Ticking Time Bomb: Counterterrorism Lessons from the U.S. Government's Failure to Prevent the Fort Hood Attack*, February 2011.

[9] We also note that we have not received a response to our March 29, 2011 letter to the Department of Justice asking a series of questions regarding the state of counterterrorism training.

Conclusion

We wish to conclude by reiterating several points. First, we believe that time is not on our side and that it is imperative that we act with the sense of urgency to create plans for countering domestic Islamist radicalization that are commensurate with the threat. Second, Muslim-Americans are critical to our success, and we should better empower communities to counter the Islamist ideology. Third, we recognize the unique and complicated aspects of a domestic counter-radicalization program. Fourth, we stand ready to assist you with legislation as needed and look forward to legislative proposals that the Administration might have.

Thank you again for your commitment and efforts to secure our nation. We look forward to meeting with you soon to discuss our concerns. We are committed to continuing to work with the Administration to protect our nation from terrorism domestically and around the world.

Sincerely,

Joseph I. Lieberman
Chairman

Susan M. Collins
Ranking Member