

Remarks by John O. Brennan, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism – As Prepared for Delivery

“A New Approach to Safeguarding Americans”

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Thank you, Steve, for your kind introduction, and thank you all for the opportunity to speak with you today. The Center for Strategic and International Studies has long provided some of the most insightful analysis and innovative ideas for strengthening our national security. So this is a very fitting forum for the subject I want to address today—the new thinking and new approach that President Obama brings to the task of safeguarding the American people from violent extremism and terrorist attacks.

President Obama has now been in office for over six months. In that time, he has rightly focused on urgent domestic challenges, including the Nation’s economic recovery and reforming health insurance and reducing the cost of healthcare for the American people. At the same time, he has never lost sight of what he has called his “single most important responsibility as President”—keeping the American people safe.

To this end, he and Secretary of State Clinton have renewed America’s commitment to diplomacy: rebuilding old alliances; strengthening critical partnerships with nations such as Russia and China; and naming special envoys and representatives to focus on some of most pressing international challenges, from Middle East peace, to Afghanistan and Pakistan, to climate change, to the crisis in Darfur. He has launched a new era of engagement with the world, including committing the United States to a new partnership with Muslims around the world—a partnership based on mutual interests and mutual respect.

To confront the transnational threats of the 21st Century, he has launched new initiatives: strengthening the global non-proliferation regime; promoting food security that fights world hunger and lifts people around the world out of poverty; and bolstering the nation’s digital defense against cyber attacks.

And to refocus the fight against those who attacked our embassies in Africa eleven years ago tomorrow and our homeland eight years ago next month, the President is proceeding with his plan to end the war in Iraq and to defeat al Qaeda and its allies in Afghanistan and Pakistan. And to ensure that our counterterrorism efforts

strengthen our national security—and not undermine it—he banned the use of enhanced interrogation techniques, is proceeding with a new plan to swiftly and certainly deal with detainees, and will close the prison at Guantanamo Bay.

Most recently, key members of the President's national security team have laid out how their departments and organizations are implementing these new strategies. Secretary of State Clinton outlined how American diplomacy will advance American interests by building new partnerships, promoting universal values, and heeding the power of our examples. Secretary of Defense Gates is reforming how we acquire weapons and reorienting our armed forces for the unconventional, irregular conflicts of today and the future.

Last week, Secretary of Homeland Security Napolitano highlighted the local, state, federal and international partnerships that will be required to keep the homeland secure from terrorist attack. FBI Director Mueller has been tireless in his efforts over the past eight years forging similarly strong partnerships with a wide array of law enforcement organizations at home and abroad. And General Jones, the President's National Security Advisor, earlier this year addressed how the Administration will more effectively address transnational challenges through a newly integrated National Security Staff at the White House.

Today—as the President's principal advisor on counterterrorism—I want to outline the President's efforts to safeguard the American people from the transnational challenge that poses one of the greatest threats to our national security—the scourge of violent extremists who would use terrorism to slaughter Americans abroad and at home.

I want to note at the outset that my professional and personal experience has greatly shaped my perspective on how best to confront the challenges we face. During a 25-year career in government, I saw first-hand the mayhem and destruction that terrorists wreak. I have seen close friends and fellow intelligence officers—good, courageous, heroic Americans—injured, maimed, and killed in terrorist attacks. Eight years ago this morning I read warnings that Osama bin Laden was determined to strike inside the U.S., but our government was unable to prevent the worst terrorist attack in American history that would occur on 9/11.

In the years since, I have seen the significant progress made in safeguarding the American people—unprecedented coordination and information sharing between federal agencies and with state and local governments; improved security at our borders and ports of entry; disruption of terrorist recruitment and financing; and a degradation of al Qaeda's ability to plan and execute attacks. And credit for much of this progress belongs to our armed forces, diplomats, intelligence officers, and law

enforcement personnel at every level. They risk their lives. Many have given their lives. And this Nation owes them an enormous debt of gratitude.

At the same time, I have seen—we all have seen—how our fight against terrorists sometimes led us to stray from our ideals as a nation. Tactics such as waterboarding were not in keeping with our values as Americans, and these practices have been rightly terminated and should not, and will not, happen again.

I believe President Obama is absolutely correct: such practices not only fail to advance our counterterrorism efforts, they actually set back our efforts. They are a recruitment bonanza for terrorists, increase the determination of our enemies, and decrease the willingness of other nations to cooperate with us. In short, they undermine our national security.

A deep appreciation for our Nation's unique example and relationships with the world has always informed my service. This includes our ties with Muslim communities. While in college in the mid 1970s, I spent a summer traveling through Indonesia, where, like President Obama, I came to see the beauty and diversity of Islam. In the decades since, I studied as an undergraduate at the American University of Cairo, I worked as a State Department political officer in Saudi Arabia, and I served as a CIA station chief in the region. And, in that time, I saw how Arab and Muslim attitudes toward the U.S. hardened, often into hatred.

It was these collective experiences—and the worldview they shaped—that led me to an extended discussion with President-elect Obama last November. He, too, was deeply concerned with how the United States was viewed in the world and how these attitudes were fueling the flames of hatred and violence. He showed a clear understanding of the historical forces and conditions shaping the world and the unique role and responsibility of the United States at this moment in history. And so I decided to return to public service, as the President's senior advisor for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism.

But since my return to public service, I have been deeply troubled by the inflammatory rhetoric, hyperbole, and intellectual narrowness that has often characterized the debate over the President's national security policies, particularly those relating to the fight against terrorists. Some like to claim that the President's policies somehow represent a wholesale dismantling of counterterrorism policies and practices adopted by his predecessor. Others claim that the President's policies constitute a wholesale retention of his predecessor's policies. Well, they can't both be right. In fact, both are wrong.

As he has said, the President rejects an absolutist approach or the imposition of a rigid ideology on our problems. Like the world itself, his views are nuanced, not simplistic; practical, not ideological. He understands the complexities and many

dimensions of the challenges presented by violent extremism. He understands that preventing terrorists from slaughtering the innocent sometimes requires making very difficult decisions—deployment of military forces, authorization of sensitive intelligence activities, the handling and disposition of terrorists that we capture and detain; and the policies we make and the measures we take to protect our homeland. And so, as he has said on many occasions, he rejects the false choice between ensuring our national security and upholding civil liberties. The United States of America has done both for centuries—and must do so again.

As we move ahead, the President feels strongly that we maintain a robust dialogue with the American people, indeed with the world, about the full range of our efforts to prevent terrorist attacks. With that in mind, I want to sketch out how the President sees this challenge and how the administration is confronting it. And I want to distinguish between two related but very distinct challenges: the immediate, near-term challenge of destroying Al Qaeda and its allies—those ready and willing to kill innocent civilians—and the longer-term challenge of confronting violent extremism generally.

First, the immediate challenge—the persistent and evolving threat from al Qaeda and its allies. President Obama is under no illusions about the imminence and severity of this threat. Indeed, he has repeatedly and forcefully challenged those who suggest that this threat has passed. To Americans who ask why our forces still fight and die in Afghanistan, he has made it clear that al Qaeda is actively plotting to attack us again and that he will not tolerate Afghanistan—or any other country—being a base for terrorists determined to kill Americans. To those abroad who doubt al Qaeda’s motives or murderous history, he said in Cairo “these are not opinions to be debated; these are facts to be dealt with.”

So here are the facts.

Al Qaeda and its affiliates are under tremendous pressure. After years of U.S. counterterrorism operations, and in partnership with other nations, al Qaeda has been seriously damaged and forced to replace many of its top-tier leadership with less experienced and less capable individuals. It is being forced to work harder and harder to raise money, to move its operatives around the world, and to plan attacks.

Nevertheless, Al Qaeda has proven to be adaptive and highly resilient and remains the most serious terrorist threat we face as a Nation. The group’s intent to carry out attacks against the United States and U.S. interests around the world—with weapons of mass destruction if possible—remains undiminished, and another attack on the U.S. homeland remains the top priority for the al Qaeda senior leadership.

From its safe haven in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, the so-called FATA, al Qaeda continues to recruit and train fighters—including extremists from Western nations—and to plot attacks. Finally, Al Qaeda's own capabilities are further leveraged by the web of relationships the group maintains with other locally run terrorist organizations around the world, from Iraq to the Arabian Peninsula, from East Africa to the Sahel and Maghreb regions of North Africa.

In short, we continue to face a dynamic and evolving threat.

Faced with this clear threat, President Obama has articulated a clear policy—to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda and its allies. That is our mission, and the President described it in no uncertain terms in his Inaugural when he said, “Our nation is at war against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred.” And to win this war against al Qaeda, the administration continues to be unrelenting, using every tool in our toolbox and every arrow in our quiver.

As part of the President's new strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan, U.S. forces are pushing the Taliban out of key population areas in Afghanistan so we can prevent the return of al Qaeda to that country.

In partnership with Pakistan—which, in the face of unrelenting brutality from al Qaeda and its allies, has shown new resolve in this fight—we are confronting al Qaeda directly, inflicting significant losses to the Taliban and al Qaeda.

In East Africa and the Trans-Sahel region, we are sharing intelligence with partner nations and building the capacity of their security forces to deny al Qaeda safe havens.

We are actively working with and through the international banking community to deny resources and funding to the al Qaeda network and the businesses that support them.

And through strong law enforcement investigations and successful prosecutions of terrorists and their supporters, we and our allies are disrupting and deterring future terrorist attacks here and abroad.

I would add one personal observation. Over the past six months we have presented President Obama with a number of actions and initiatives against al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. Not only has he approved these operations, he has encouraged us to be even more aggressive, even more proactive, and even more innovative, to seek out new ways and new opportunities for taking down these terrorists before they can kill more innocent men, women, and children.

To this end, the President is devoting new resources, investing in new capabilities, approving new actions, and adapting our policies across the board.

He is confronting what he has identified as the most immediate and extreme threat to global security—the possibility that terrorists will obtain and use a nuclear weapon. That is why he has taken a number of critical steps: leading the effort for a stronger global nonproliferation regime; launching an international effort to secure the world's vulnerable nuclear material in four years; and hosting a Global Nuclear Summit next year. The risk of just one terrorist with just one nuclear weapon is a risk we simply cannot afford to take.

To ensure our military has the new capabilities and technologies its needs for this fight, he accelerated the increase in the size of the Army and the Marines, has approved another increase in the size of the Army, is expanding our Special Forces, and is increasing the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets our troops need in Afghanistan.

To ensure we have the timely and accurate intelligence that prevents terrorist attacks and saves lives, we are continuing to adapt and strengthen the intelligence community by expanding human intelligence; strengthening operations; enhancing the workforce with improved linguistic and cultural skills; filling intelligence gaps; improving collaboration across the intelligence community; and promoting greater coordination with foreign intelligence partners.

And to better secure the homeland from attack, we're taking the steps Secretary Napolitano described last week: enhancing information sharing arrangements with our allies and partners; strengthening partnerships with state and local officials, law enforcement, and first responders; and improving the security of our critical infrastructure, borders, ports, and airports.

Our homeland security efforts include working aggressively to prevent and prepare for bio-terrorism, which is why the President's budget makes major investments in our public health infrastructure, including new technologies to detect attacks and new vaccines to respond in a crisis. And I would note that our coordinated response to the H1N1 virus—across the federal government, with state and local governments, and with the private sector and the public—and our extensive preparations for the coming flu season will ensure that we are better prepared for any future bio-terrorist attack.

So there should be no doubt. As the President has told us privately and as he has said publicly, this administration “will do everything in our power to keep the American people safe...with certainty that we can defeat al Qaeda.”

At the same time, the President understands that military power, intelligence operations, and law enforcement alone will never solve the second, longer-term challenge we face: the threat of violent extremism generally, including the political, economic, and social factors that help put so many individuals on the path to violence. And here is where I believe President Obama is bringing a fundamentally new and more effective approach to the long-term obligation of safeguarding the American people. This new approach has five key elements.

First, and perhaps most significantly, the fight against terrorists and violent extremists has been returned to its right and proper place: no longer defining—indeed, distorting—our entire national security and foreign policy, but rather serving as a vital part of those larger policies. President Obama has made it clear that the United States will not be defined simply by what we are against, but by what we are for—the opportunity, liberties, prosperity, and common aspirations we share with the world.

Rather than looking at allies and other nations through the narrow prism of terrorism—whether they are with us or against us—the administration is now engaging other countries and peoples across a broader range of areas. Rather than treating so many of our foreign affairs programs—foreign assistance, development, democracy promotion—as simply extensions of the fight against terrorists, we will do these things—promote economic growth, good governance, transparency and accountability—because they serve our common interests and common security; not just in regions gripped by violent extremism, but around the world.

We see this new approach most vividly in the President's personal engagement with the world—his trips, his speeches, his town halls with foreign audiences—where he addresses terrorism directly and forcefully. At the same time, terrorism is recognized as one of the many transnational challenges the world will face in the 21st Century. We saw this in his speech in Cairo, where he spoke of a “broader engagement” with the world's Muslims, including the issues important to them: education, public health, economic development, responsive governance, and women's rights.

Indeed, it was telling that the President was actually criticized in certain quarters in this country for not using words like “terror,” “terrorism” or “terrorist” in that speech. This goes to the heart of his new approach. Why should a great and powerful nation like the United States allow its relationship with more than a billion Muslims around the world be defined by the narrow hatred and nihilistic actions of an exceptionally small minority of Muslims? After all, this is precisely what Osama bin Laden intended with the Sept. 11 attacks: to use al Qaeda to foment a clash of civilizations in which the United States and Islam are seen as distinct identities that are in conflict. In his approach to the world and in his approach to safeguarding the American people, President Obama is determined not to validate al Qaeda's twisted worldview.

This leads directly to the second element of the President's approach—a clear, more precise definition of this challenge. This is critically important. How you define a problem shapes how you address it. As many have noted, the President does not describe this as a “war on terrorism.” That is because “terrorism” is but a tactic—a means to an end, which in al Qaeda's case is global domination by an Islamic caliphate. Confusing ends and means is dangerous, because by focusing on the tactic, we risk floundering among the terrorist trees while missing the growth of the extremist forest. And ultimately, confusing ends and means is self-defeating, because you can never fully defeat a tactic like terrorism any more than you can defeat the tactic of war itself.

Likewise, the President does not describe this as a “global war.” Yes, al Qaeda and other terrorists groups operate in many corners of the world and continue to launch attacks in different nations, as we saw most recently in Jakarta. And yes, the United States will confront al Qaeda aggressively wherever it exists so that it enjoys no safe haven. But describing our efforts as a “global war” only plays into the warped narrative that al Qaeda propagates. It plays into the misleading and dangerous notion that the U.S. is somehow in conflict with the rest of the world. It risks setting our Nation apart from the world, rather than emphasizing the interests we share. And perhaps most dangerously, portraying this as a “global” war risks reinforcing the very image that al Qaeda seeks to project of itself—that it is a highly organized, global entity capable of replacing sovereign nations with a global caliphate. And nothing could be further from the truth.

Nor does President Obama see this challenge as a fight against “jihadists.” Describing terrorists in this way—using a legitimate term, “jihad,” meaning to purify oneself or to wage a holy struggle for a moral goal—risks giving these murderers the religious legitimacy they desperately seek but in no way deserve. Worse, it risks reinforcing the idea that the United States is somehow at war with Islam itself. And this is why President Obama has confronted this perception directly and forcefully in his speeches to Muslim audiences, declaring that America is not and never will be at war with Islam.

Instead, as the President has made clear, we are at war with al Qaeda, which attacked us on 9/11 and killed 3,000 people. We are at war with its violent extremist allies who seek to carry on al Qaeda's murderous agenda. These are the terrorists we will destroy. These are the extremists we will defeat.

Even as the President takes a more focused view of the threat, his approach includes a third element: a broader, more accurate understanding of the causes and conditions that help fuel violent extremism, be they in Pakistan and Afghanistan or Somalia and Yemen.

The President has been very clear on this. Poverty does not cause violence and terrorism. Lack of education does not cause terrorism. But just as there is no excuse for the wanton slaughter of innocents, there is no denying that when children have no hope for an education, when young people have no hope for a job and feel disconnected from the modern world, when governments fail to provide for the basic needs of their people, then people become more susceptible to ideologies of violence and death. Extremist violence and terrorist attacks are therefore often the final murderous manifestation of a long process rooted in hopelessness, humiliation, and hatred.

Therefore, any comprehensive approach has to also address the upstream factors—the conditions that help fuel violent extremism. Indeed, the counterinsurgency lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan apply equally to the broader fight against extremism: we cannot shoot ourselves out of this challenge. We can take out all the terrorists we want—their leadership and their foot soldiers. But if we fail to confront the broader political, economic, and social conditions in which extremists thrive, then there will always be another recruit in the pipeline, another attack coming downstream. Indeed, our failure to address these conditions also plays into the extremists' hands—allowing them to make the false claim that the United States actually wants to keep people impoverished and unempowered.

It is important to note that these factors not only help fuel violent extremism but also contribute to a wide range of national security threats – from other types of organized violence and sociopolitical instability to resource competition. And addressing these factors will help the United States deal with a wide range of threats, including violent extremism.

This is why the President's approach includes a critical fourth element—the recognition that addressing these upstream factors is ultimately not a military operation but a political, economic, and social campaign to meet the basic needs and legitimate grievances of ordinary people: security for their communities, education for children, a job and income for parents, and a sense of dignity and worth.

The extremists know this; wherever governments are unable to provide for the legitimate needs of their people, these groups step into the void. It is why they offer free education to impoverished Pakistani children, where they can recruit and indoctrinate the next generation. It is why Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza provide so many social services to the poor even as they commit heinous acts of terror. It is why the terrorist warlord in Somalia can so easily recruit a destitute teenager who sees nothing but a future of poverty and despair.

President Obama understands that successfully defeating these extremists over the long term requires breaking this bond—exposing al Qaeda as nothing but the death cult that it is and isolating extremists from the people they pretend to serve. Often, the extremists do this themselves. Time and again, their barbarism, brutality, and beheadings have provoked backlashes among ordinary people, from Afghanistan under the Taliban to al Qaeda in Iraq and increasingly in Pakistan today.

Going forward, people must come to see that it is the likes of al Qaeda and the Taliban, Hezbollah, and Hamas—not the United States—that is holding their aspirations hostage; that of all those al Qaeda has killed, most have been Muslims; that the murder of innocent civilians, as the President said in Cairo, is not how moral authority is claimed, but how it is surrendered; that the future offered by extremists is not one of peace but violence, not of hope and opportunity but poverty and despair.

Indeed, it is people in these countries, not the United States, who ultimately will isolate these extremists: governments that provide for the basic security and needs of their people; strong and transparent institutions free from corruption; mainstream clerics and scholars who teach that Islam promotes peace, not extremism; and ordinary people who are ready to choose a future free from violence and fear. Still, the United States can and must play its part. For even as we condemn and oppose the illegitimate tactics used by terrorists, we need to acknowledge and address the legitimate needs and grievances of the ordinary people those terrorists claim to represent.

Which leads to the fifth and final part of the President's approach—integrating every element of American power to ensure that those “upstream” factors discourage rather than encourage violent extremism. After all, the most effective long-term strategy for safeguarding the American people is one that promotes a future where a young man or woman never even considers joining an extremist group in the first place; where they reject out of hand the idea of picking up that gun or strapping on that suicide vest; where they have faith in the political process and confidence in the rule of law; where they realize that they can build, not simply destroy—and that the United States is a real partner in opportunity, prosperity, dignity, and peace.

That is why President Obama is committed to using every element of our national power to address the underlying causes and conditions that fuel so many national security threats, including violent extremism. We will take a multidimensional, multi-departmental, multi-national approach.

We will use our military power, not only to take down al Qaeda and its allies, but to train and build up the capacity of foreign militaries and security forces—as we are doing from Iraq to Afghanistan to Africa—because if these militaries and security forces can uphold the rule of law, if these countries can take responsibility for their

own security, then militias, warlords, and terrorists will find it harder to win sympathizers and recruits with the false promise of security and stability. So the President has increased funding to help build the capacity of foreign law enforcement, border security, and judiciaries.

We will use our power to demonstrate that seemingly intractable problems and legitimate grievances can be resolved through diplomacy, dialogue, and the democratic process. That is why we are supporting national elections in Afghanistan and helping to protect the rights of all Afghans. That is why the President has made clear that our relationship with Pakistan is grounded in support for Pakistan's democratic institutions and the Pakistani people. That is why we support an Iraqi government that promotes national unity and is nonsectarian. And that is why the administration is aggressively pursuing negotiations to achieve the goal of two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security.

We will also use our economic power to promote opportunity and prosperity. This will help restore people's hope in the political process and in legitimate institutions. In Afghanistan, this means a dramatic increase in our development efforts—working with the government to end corruption, improve the delivery of basic services and build an economy that isn't dominated by drugs. In Pakistan, it means a billion and a half dollars in direct support to the Pakistani people every year for education, health care, and infrastructure, as well as opportunity zones to spark development in the border regions. And we are harnessing our economic power to make substantial increases in foreign assistance generally—including poverty reduction, global health, and food security—not as a crutch for societies in need, but as a catalyst for development, good governance, and long-term prosperity.

Finally, as I described, we will harness perhaps our greatest asset of all—the power of America's moral example. Even as we aggressively pursue terrorists and extremists, we will uphold the values of justice, liberty, dignity and rule of law that make people want to work with us and other governments want to partner with us.

Taken together, the policies and priorities I've described constitute the contours of a new strategic approach—a new way of seeing this challenge and a new way of confronting it in a more comprehensive manner. The President understands that for the fanatical few, no amount of outreach and engagement will ever dissuade them from violence and murder. So faced with that persistent and evolving terrorist threat, President Obama and his administration will be unrelenting, unwavering, and unyielding in its efforts to defeat, disrupt, and dismantle al Qaeda and its allies.

At the same time, the United States will pursue a more effective and comprehensive approach against the longer-term threat of violent extremism in the five key areas I described.

And at home, we know that we can rely on the extraordinary capabilities of the American people to be fully engaged in our shared effort to protect ourselves. We will not live our lives in fear, but rather in confidence, as we strengthen our ability to prevent attacks and reduce our vulnerabilities wherever they exist. So, just as we work to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat terrorism with a wide range of efforts abroad, we will also strengthen our efforts here at home to create strong and resilient communities prepared to stand together and let the terrorists know that they will never succeed in shaking our will.

In less than four weeks, America and the world will again mark the anniversary of that terrible day in September when so many innocents were ruthlessly murdered as they went about their daily lives. The U.S. government was unable to prevent that attack. But the American people should know: we are doing everything in our power to prevent another one. And eight years on, that mission demands nothing less than the new thinking that President Obama brings to this challenge and the new approach that this administration will pursue in the years ahead as we fulfill our single most important responsibility—ensuring the safety and security of the American people.

Thank you very much.

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