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Keynote Address: 2014 Gulf of Aden Regional Counterterrorism Forum

Remarks

Geeta Pasi**U.S. Ambassador to Djibouti****Djibouti, Djibouti****February 3, 2014**

Good morning. I'd like to thank the Government of Djibouti for hosting this conference in Djibouti and the U.S. State Department's Counterterrorism Bureau for funding and organizing the conference. I would also like to thank Ms. Mako Hassan and everyone at ATTA for doing such an outstanding job of getting all the participants here and for helping to facilitate this forum. This forum – and forums like it – are increasingly important as they enable the building of relationships and enhance a shared understanding of best practices as we all work together to achieve our collective goals – a transnational response to a transnational threat.

The Gulf of Aden Regional Counterterrorism Forum, which first convened in Sana'a, Yemen last April, was created out of an understanding of the common threat across the borders of those represented here today. This week's forum comes at a pivotal time. We've made progress with our collective strategic counterterrorism efforts, but a great deal of work remains to be done.

The preeminent security threat to the United States continues to be from al-Qa'ida and its affiliates and adherents around the world. As we work to counter this threat over the long term, the United States is committed to helping build partner nation capabilities and to working with our partners to counter the murderous ideology that continues to incite indiscriminate violence around the world. Defeating a terrorist network requires us to work together to disrupt criminal and terrorist financial networks, strengthen rule of law institutions while respecting human rights, address recruitment, and eliminate the safe havens that protect and facilitate this activity. We need to take on violent extremist ideology and diminish its appeal.

Today, I'd like to describe briefly the global threat environment, honing in on the threats specific to the countries represented here today, and then outline some of the bilateral and regional approaches we are using to meet long-term challenges.

The Global Threat Environment

Through the actions of the United States and others, many senior al-Qai'da leaders have been removed from the battlefield or are facing trial. The ability of AQ's senior leadership to direct the activities and attacks of its affiliates has diminished, as its leaders focus their energies on evading capture. At the same time, AQ affiliates in this region and elsewhere have grown more independent, have become increasingly active, and are increasingly setting their own goals and specifying their own targets.

As avenues previously open to these and other violent extremist organizations for receiving and sending funds have become more difficult to access, several groups have engaged in kidnapping for ransom and other criminal activities, and thus have also increased their financial independence. Though AQ affiliates still seek to attack targets abroad, they seem more inclined to focus on smaller scale attacks closer to their home base.

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Before discussing the Gulf of Aden region, I'd like to mention briefly the tumultuous events of the past three-plus years in the Middle East and North Africa, which have complicated the counterterrorism picture. Arms proliferation in the wake of the revolution in Libya and civil and political strife in Mali presented terrorists with new opportunities to take advantage of regional instability. Foreign fighters from Europe, North Africa, and South Asia have traveled to Syria to join the fight with the Nusrah Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

Meanwhile, in West Africa, we are seeing a loosely organized collection of factions known as Boko Haram – some of them with ties to al-Qa'ida in the Maghreb – exploiting the grievances of northern Nigerians to gain recruits and public sympathy. The number and sophistication of Boko Haram's attacks are increasing, and while the group focuses principally on local Nigerian issues and actors, there is evidence that it is developing financial and training links with other violent extremists in West Africa.

In the Gulf of Aden region, two al-Qa'ida affiliates foster regional instability through their brutal terrorist tactics. These are al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula - AQAP – based in Yemen and al-Shabaab based in Somalia.

In Yemen, the fight against AQAP is a work in progress. We commend the Yemeni people on the January 25 conclusion of the National Dialogue Conference and support efforts toward full implementation of the political transition initiative. Yemen illustrates the value of a comprehensive approach to countering terrorism. While Yemeni security forces are increasing their capacity to combat terror and taking actions to mitigate threats, the international community is assisting the Yemeni government's efforts to address the needs of the Yemeni people by supporting the political transition and delivering humanitarian and economic aid. In this endeavor, the United States is working closely with the Friends of Yemen group, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the international community.

Since this forum last met in Sana'a, Somalia has marked more than one year since the end of its own political transition. The recent formation of a new cabinet in Mogadishu, the peaceful elections and transition of power in Puntland in January, the agreement between the central government and the Interim Jubaland Administration last August, and the ongoing dialogue between Somaliland and Federal Government of Somalia are hopeful signs of a new era in this conflict-stricken country. We remain committed to assisting Somalia in the difficult work to establish good governance and to provide opportunity and security for all Somali people.

The combined efforts of the Somali National Security Forces and AMISOM against al-Shabaab – with strong financial support and training from Western partners –are establishing the security conditions necessary for Somalia's government to operate. During the past year, al-Shabaab proved time and time again through its suicide attacks and frequent bombings that it does not stand with the Somali people. Its September 2013 siege on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi that targeted civilians – including women and children -- demonstrated again that it remains a threat to the entire region. But we know that al-Shabaab is a fractured organization fighting for relevance in a country that is showing signs of new life. We are confident that the recently authorized AMISOM troop increase will increase the pressure on al-Shabaab and are hopeful that progress by the central government, including increased collaboration with the regions of Somalia and an extension of public services will show all Somalis that a new day has dawned.

I would be remiss not to mention Djibouti, the country in which I have the pleasure of serving as U.S. ambassador. Even though it does not face the same direct threat as Somalia or Yemen, it is in a tough neighborhood and faces many challenges. Djibouti has demonstrated itself as a force for peace and stability in the region and a staunch ally in the fight against terrorism. I want to thank Djibouti for its troop deployment to Somalia as part of AMISOM. Djiboutian troops have played a crucial role in stabilizing areas of Somalia where they are deployed. Given its location along the border with Somalia and just across the Gulf of Aden from Yemen, Djibouti has undertaken efforts to increase training its police and military forces and has increased its emphasis at border control points to screen for potential security threats. In addition, as most of you already know, Djibouti is the host of Camp Lemonnier, which serves as headquarters to approximately 4,000 U.S. troops, including the Combined Joint Task Force for the Horn of Africa. I want to publicly extend thanks to the Government of Djibouti for their strong partnership and leadership. I should also note that we will have the privilege of hearing from the commander of the U.S. Combined Joint Task Force for the Horn of Africa, General Wayne Grigsby, tomorrow during our session on the role of the military in counterterrorism.

What we're doing

Now that we have examined the changing landscape of terrorism in the world, we have to ask ourselves the question – how do we deal with this changing security environment?

First, we need to keep doing what we know works: continue to use our military, intelligence, and law enforcement assets to go after terrorist groups that threaten our collective security.

At the same time, we need to identify the factors that, despite our successes, are supporting the continued vitality of

terrorist organizations and develop the innovative and cross-cutting, rule of law-based strategies that will help cut off that support. Violent extremism is a dynamic, adaptable phenomenon that is highly dependent on local political, social, and economic circumstances. We know that terrorist movements thrive on state failure, political upheaval and poor governance, among other factors. They are opportunistic – adapting quickly to exploit openings presented by political transitions and upheavals.

The United States is focused on two key strategic areas: 1) capacity building, so that countries can do a better job themselves of dealing with the threats within their own borders and regions; and 2) strengthening our work in countering violent extremism – or CVE. The goal of CVE is to deny terrorist groups new recruits, by: providing positive alternatives to communities most at risk of recruitment and radicalization to violence; countering terrorist narratives and the violent extremist worldview; and building the capacity of governments and civil society to counter violent extremism.

Working with our partners, both bilaterally and multilateral is crucial. We cannot do this alone. So, with the goal of building an international counterterrorism architecture for 21st century threats, the United States, together with 28 partner countries and the European Union, launched the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) in 2011. The Forum seeks to counter violent extremism and strengthen civilian institutions that are essential for addressing not only terrorism, but related transnational security threats. It provides a valuable framework for practitioners and policymakers to share expertise, challenges, and good practices on dealing with this shared threat and deliver rule of law-based assistance so partners—particularly in countries in transition to democracy—can simultaneously deal with the threats as they evolve and protect the human rights of their citizens.

In a relatively short time, the GCTF has made its mark, having already mobilized more than \$230 million in member funds and set in motion two international training centers to provide platforms for sustainable training on countering violent extremism and strengthening rule-of-law institutions. It has developed practical guidance for all countries to follow in the areas of rule of law, kidnapping for ransom, and prison de-radicalization and disengagement.

I know that representatives from each of your countries, perhaps even some of you, have participated in activities organized by the Forum's Horn of Africa Region Working Group, and I expect that you have been able to benefit from the expertise that is shared within and good practices developed through the GCTF. We will discuss some of those best practices during the rest of this week's meetings. We also hope that your governments will participate in next meeting of the GCTF's Horn of Africa Working Group in Nairobi on 12-13 March, where the focus will be on strengthening cooperation and capacities in the region on law enforcement and CVE.

On the bilateral front, the U.S. Antiterrorism Assistance (ATA) program continues to engage with each of your countries to build capacity in a wide spectrum of counterterrorism skills, from bomb detection, to crime scene investigation, to border, aviation, and cyber security. ATA, offered courses, seminars, and consultations to roughly 11,000 participants from over 50 countries in 2013, including hundreds of security and law enforcement officials in Djibouti, Somalia, and Yemen.

We have also worked closely with our partners across the globe, including representatives from Djibouti, Somalia and Yemen, to make important progress in safeguarding our shared financial system against those who wish to exploit it. Since 2010, our Counterterrorism Finance Program has trained more than 5,400 key specialists in governments and financial institutions throughout the world. We are proud to be able to partner with you in the struggle to combat terrorist financing.

Through the Terrorist Interdiction Program (TIP), the Department enhances border security capabilities for partner nations at risk of terrorist activity – by providing a computerized screening-list system, the Personal Identification Secure Comparison and Evaluation System (PISCES). As of February 2014, government authorities in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda manage and operate a total of 38 PISCES installations at airports, seaports, and land borders to screen, identify, and deter terrorist travelers. Of these 38 PISCES installations, 35 operate biometric screening, with fingerprints, as part of primary processing. And across the Gulf of Aden, Yemen operates 19 PISCES installations.

To contest the terrorist narrative, President Obama established the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) in 2010. CSCC's Digital Outreach Team counters violent extremist propaganda online every day in Arabic, Punjabi, Somali, and Urdu. CSCC's activities have elicited vigorous responses from violent extremist ideologues, indicating that they view CSCC's work as a threat to their own messaging efforts.

The shifting terrorism landscape makes local CVE efforts all the more important. In 2013, on the margins of the UN General Assembly, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry announced the Global Fund for Community Engagement and Resilience – the first-ever public-private global fund to support local, grassroots efforts to counter violent extremism in all of its forms and manifestations. It is anticipated that the Fund will raise more than \$200 million over the next 10 years to support local CVE causes.

Looking Forward

Building new partnerships, strengthening existing partnerships, and helping other countries foster collaborative relationships with partner nations are all vital to our counterterrorism efforts. This is one of the reasons we organized this conference. We have seen in many places how regional coalitions and organizations can play a critical role in addressing security challenges and threats. Examples of these partnerships include the international response in northern Mali, the response of AMISOM in Somalia, and regional assistance from the Gulf Cooperation Council states in Yemen.

While the people of the Gulf of Aden region will determine their own course, the United States can provide a wide variety of advice and assistance to civilian institutions, with a particular focus on countries transitioning from emergency counterterrorism laws to a rule-of-law framework. Ultimately, counterterrorism and rule of law goals are closely aligned and reinforce one another. It is important that, in our zeal to protect our citizens, we not weaken their legal rights and protections.

This is one of the reasons we have shaped the agenda for this week's Forum as we have. We want to focus this week on the rule of law in counterterrorism efforts, including the role of legal frameworks, law enforcement and the military among other issues. We have designed the sessions so that you can hear from experts on each of the topics but also have plenty of time to engage in lively discussion amongst yourselves about how these roles realistically play out in each of your countries. Our goal is for you to build deeper relationships with your colleagues so you can rely on each other in the future, to share experiences and develop new ideas that help us all counter the constantly evolving threats that face us each day.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I hope the rest of the Forum is productive.

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