

**Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),
Ranking Member, Senate Judiciary Committee
Hearing on Oversight of the Department of Homeland Security
June 30, 2016**

We welcome Secretary Johnson back to the Committee. This oversight hearing on the security of our homeland is timely in the wake of one of the worst mass shootings in our nation's history. The massacre of 49 innocent people at an LGBT nightclub in Orlando is a national tragedy. It adds to the ever-growing list of mass shootings across the country: an office party in San Bernardino, California; a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs, Colorado; the historic Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina; a Jewish community center in Kansas City, Kansas; a Sikh Temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin; and an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, that none of us will ever forget. We need to take action to keep this country safe. And we need to do it now.

If we are focused on *homeland* security, we need to confront what all these acts of domestic terrorism have involved. We need to strengthen our gun safety laws. The American people have had enough excuses. They want to know that Congress is finally doing something to keep guns out of the hands of criminals and suspected terrorists. We need universal background checks for firearms purchases – so people cannot use the Internet and gun shows to evade background checks. We need to give the FBI the authority to deny guns to individuals suspected of terrorism. Senator Collins drafted compromise legislation to achieve this goal, and a majority of Senators rejected the Senate Republican leadership's attempt to kill it. The Republican leadership now needs to ensure that her proposal moves forward and receives proper consideration.

We also need to strengthen our laws to enable agents and prosecutors to go after firearms traffickers and straw purchasers who put guns in the hands of terrorists and criminals. As we saw in San Bernardino, terrorists can acquire assault rifles by simply using a friend to purchase the guns for them. Yet prosecuting such individuals for firearms trafficking has proven to be extremely difficult. Senator Collins and I have a proposal to fix these laws, and it was recently included in a floor amendment I filed with Senator Mikulski. It will provide law enforcement agencies with the tools they need to deter and prosecute those who traffic in firearms. And it will help to close another glaring loophole in our gun laws that allows terrorists and criminals to easily acquire powerful firearms.

In addition to stronger gun safety laws, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Justice, and the FBI also need more funding. Congress must give these agencies the resources they need to combat acts of terrorism and hate. This should not be controversial.

Another step Congress must take to keep this country safe is to finally pass comprehensive immigration reform. Congress must act to bring out of the shadows the millions of families who came here for a better life – the hardworking mothers and fathers who want nothing more than to give their children a chance at the American Dream. We should have passed immigration reform years ago. Fixing our broken immigration system is not just about providing the safety, stability and peace of mind that these families deserve. It also improves national security when we know

who is here. It enhances public safety when communities are willing to go to the police to report criminal activity, without fear of deportation. That is why I am concerned about recent raids targeting Central American mothers and children who pose no threat to our communities. Instead of promoting community trust, these raids are undermining it. These individuals have fled horrific violence in their home countries. This is a terribly misguided policy, and it does not keep us safe. We must do everything we can to ensure that these individuals receive meaningful due process before they are sent back to dangerous conditions from which they fled.

We are also safer when we are united. Earlier this week, this Committee received divisive testimony from witnesses who cast suspicion on patriotic Muslim Americans, including two members of Congress. There was ugly rhetoric about a religion practiced by more than a billion people worldwide, and about Muslim American organizations that serve as important voices on a range of issues. I expect that some of these same extreme voices will use the recent bombing in Istanbul to congratulate themselves for their positions. But make no mistake -- this rhetoric will not make us safer.

It will not make us safer to cast suspicion on our neighbors and fellow citizens simply because they belong to a particular religious, ethnic, or racial group. It will not make us safer to threaten to build a wall on our southern border and make Mexico pay for it. It will not make us safer to call for a Muslim ban, or to suggest that terrorist sympathizers have infiltrated the administration, or to insinuate that all Muslim Americans were somehow complicit in the Orlando attack. These toxic and divisive statements are not only wrong. They undermine the security of this country – by feeding right into the warped narrative of groups like ISIS and al Qaeda. And they undermine the safety of the Muslim American community, which has faced a dramatic increase in hate crimes over the past year.

It is time to stop the scapegoating and fear mongering. The ugly rhetoric and divisive proposals that some in the Republican Party are peddling are not worthy of this great Nation.

Mr. Secretary, I look forward to hearing your views on how to keep this great Nation strong, secure, united, and anchored in our longstanding ideals.

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