

STATEMENT OF RANKING MEMBER JACKIE SPEIER (D-CA)

Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence

“Unrest in the Middle East and North Africa: Ramifications for U.S. Homeland Security.”

**April 6, 2011 at 10:30 AM
311 Cannon House Office Building**

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding today’s hearing on the unrest in the Middle East and North Africa and what it means for the homeland.

I look forward to working with you and carrying forward the strong bipartisanship that this Subcommittee has demonstrated in the past.

I also want to join you in welcoming our distinguished panel of witnesses.

Over the last few months, we have witnessed an unprecedented wave of unrest and revolutionary furor in north Africa and the Middle East, including among some of our long-time allies. We have now joined in military action in Libya to prevent a humanitarian crisis.

We know the wave of unrest spreading across the region began with one person’s feelings of frustration and disenfranchisement, but the underlying symptoms of corruption, alienation, and oppression have long plagued the area.

In a blink of an eye, the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt have been toppled, and protest movements have erupted in Jordan, Bahrain, Syria and others, and their fates remain to be determined.

In this hearing, we are examining important questions about how these events will influence the ongoing international terrorist threat and our counterterrorism efforts across the region, and their implications for our efforts here at home.

For the first time in decades, relationships that we have relied on in the fight against terrorism are changing, and in some cases, we will have to work with new partners who will not necessarily respect past security agreements and practices. How do we most effectively bridge the divide between the old and new governments?

Egypt and Tunisia, for example, have reportedly disbanded their long feared state-security forces. How will this affect our longstanding security relationships and joint counterterrorism efforts?

There may also be political vacuums for prolonged periods of time in many of these countries, leaving open the possibility for terrorist groups to exploit the lack of coordinated operations and intelligence sharing.

Of course, any change—and particularly unplanned for revolutionary change, presents us with challenges as well as opportunities.

It is critical that we work with the new leaders to ensure that they not only have effective counterterrorism policies, but that they respect the human rights of their own populations.

For too long, we have supported Middle East regimes with blinders on, fearing the alternatives would be far worse.

Unfortunately, these blinders resulted in us being caught by surprise by what was actually happening on the streets and now we are left scrambling to answer critical questions like:

Who is taking power in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen? Who is the Muslim Brotherhood? Who are the rebels in Libya?

As we seek to answer these basic questions and define our approach to a reshuffled Middle East and North Africa, we must support the democratic ambitions of the people, while being pragmatic in our assessment of the threats to our homeland.

In Yemen, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is already capitalizing on the unrest by consolidating their power in the tribal regions outside the capital.

We know that President Saleh is too consumed with his own political survival to make AQAP a priority and has even diverted counterterrorism forces to protect the last remnants of his regime.

With or without President Saleh, we must continue to work with Yemen to combat AQAP as it attempts to plot against the homeland.

In Libya, we must ensure that the “flickers” of al Qaeda activity, as described by Admiral Stavridis, do not grow and subvert the efforts by the rebels to secure greater freedoms.

Similarly, we must keep a close eye on Colonel Qadhafi, an unpredictable dictator with a long history of supporting terrorism, including allowing and supporting terrorist training camps on Libyan soil.

In Egypt, we need more information on the thousands of inmates that were released or escaped from prison during the protests and whether they have ties to terrorist organizations.

But, before we jump to conclusions, we must have the facts to differentiate terrorist groups from other legitimate and indigenous political organizations.

And, in Syria, we have a state-sponsor of terrorism that could fall, opening the door for Hamas and Iran-backed Hezbollah to take advantage of the chaos.

While the outlook may appear grim and the uncertainty overwhelming, many still believe that democracy is not a friend to al Qaeda or its affiliates.

Some jihadist propaganda, including the latest edition of AQAP’s *Inspire* magazine, is saying otherwise, so we must better understand what we can do to ensure that these democratic movements do not develop into potential recruiting grounds for violent extremism.

Overall, we still know very little about how the terrorist threat may evolve, so we must keep a watchful eye as the events continue to unfold.

And, we cannot afford to be caught off-guard again, as was the case when the protests started.

Once we learn that the terrorist threats are changing, so must our counterterrorism efforts.

We must take a hard look at our old and new partners in the region and re-evaluate our counterterrorism strategy as necessary.

While protecting the homeland often begins abroad, we must also ensure our federal, state, and local officials here at home are aware of the changing security environment and have the information and resources they need to keep Americans safe.