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"The Role of the U.S. Military in Combating Violent Extremism"

Chairman Nelson, Senator LeMieux, Distinguished Members of the Committee, it is an honor for me to provide testimony to you today on our nation's efforts to counter violent extremism, and specifically the role of the military in those efforts. While I am proud to work in the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, and several of my colleagues there have helped me prepare this statement, I should note that these remarks are my own and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the U.S. Military Academy, the Army, the Department of Defense or any other agency of government. These are my personal views only.

Characteristics of the Fight

Let me begin by offering a brief summary of how I view the fight we are in—and I use the term "we" in the broadest sense imaginable. First, there are a variety of violent extremist ideologies that appeal to a very small percent of the world's populations, including right here in the U.S. These ideologies motivate ethno-nationalists and separatists, left-wing and right-wing groups, environmental and animal rights extremists, and groups who claim some religious justification for their extremist agendas.

Many things can diminish the appeal of these ideologies—things like good, strong, legitimate governance; open, tolerant and inclusive civil societies; widespread economic prosperity; and forces of political and religious moderation. Conversely, the opposite of these things may enhance the appeal of violent extremist ideologies—things like authoritarian, corrupt, weak governments; severe economic distress; a social and political climate of intolerance; and hatreds derived from ignorance and mistrust toward different ethnic or religious groups.²

When I teach my cadets at West Point, I stress to them the importance of understanding violent extremist groups, as well as the critical environmental dimensions where these groups find support, because this is the landscape of challenges these future Army officers are going to face when they graduate. We discuss at length how humankind is embroiled in a struggle against a range of violent extremists who challenge our daily efforts to achieve security, peace and prosperity. Civil society and religious communities in particular play a central role in this struggle, mostly as unwilling and unfortunate victims of a small handful of very misguided and potentially lethal people.

Defending our nation from these forces of extremism is a task that falls to many elements of the U.S. government, including the military, and requires foreign partners—especially foreign militaries, intelligence services and police forces—as well as civilian experts outside the U.S. government. Since there is little that is appropriate for our military to do to counter the very important domestic, homegrown dimensions of violent extremism, my remarks here will focus on what our men and women in uniform are doing overseas—and doing very well—to support the world's long-term fight against violent extremism.

The Role of the U.S. Military

Now, I'd like to highlight what I believe to be four of the most important assets that our military brings to this fight.

(1) First, our troops provide improvements in human security, through kinetic action both offensive and defensive; they weaken, disrupt and destroy the safe haven and territorial base of the violent extremists. Not only are they doing this in Iraq and Afghanistan, but they have been assisting government forces in Colombia, the Philippines, Somalia and many other countries in doing this important work.

The improving security mission also involves training and educating local military and police forces, which our military is doing in nine African countries through the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership as well as in places like the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Colombia and even some Caribbean islands, in addition to Iraq and Afghanistan. And another important dimension of the security realm involves creating spaces for safe dialogue, healthy commerce, development and civic/political processes in places that have been besieged by violent extremists. Building tolerant, inclusive societies is not something done by force, or even through leadership of foreign entities like the U.S. military. It is inherently an indigenous, organic process in which our military plays at best a minor but important facilitating role by providing these secure spaces for respectful dialogue and exchange of ideas.

(2) A second essential area of the military effort involves communicating effectively with both terrorized communities and with those extremists who use violence to achieve their objectives. This is what I called "influence warfare" in my recent book, ⁵ and it is done not only through conventional information operations, but simply by our military's presence. When trying to influence the perceptions, hearts and minds of our allies and adversaries, there is no substitute for physical presence, and our men and women in uniform serve a vital function here in helping to understand and shape perceptions of security, justice and a brighter future without violent extremism. Countering ideologies is another fundamental aspect of this struggle, because the voices of violent extremists must not go unchallenged. Military professionals are engaged in this aspect of the fight not only through local efforts in Iraq and the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, but also in places like North Africa, where the Department of Defense sponsors the popular Magharebia website. Clearly, as part of the broader struggle I've described, we must convince violent extremists that their way is a dead end, figuratively and literally. We

must make it more difficult for extremists to disseminate messages of hate and replace those messages with an alternative vision of moderation, good governance and human security.

- (3) A third key area of military effort involves civil affairs and development projects. In concert with security, these help improve a population's perception toward the central government's ability to effectively and legitimately govern, and make them less likely to turn to groups affiliated with extremists who provide alternative government services. Today, military units around the world are assisting foreign governments with efforts to improve education, rule of law, sanitation and public works, transportation, health services, and good governance. For example, in Djibouti, the Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa is working to build school facilities, combat the spread of Malaria, host business and government leadership summits, and in general work to strengthen this important national ally. In Afghanistan, our troops have complemented efforts of USAID, NGOs and the international community by digging wells and building other critical infrastructure facilities, and helping local government representatives provide free medical care to villages throughout the country. These and other so-called "soft power" activities can have a lasting impact on diminishing the resonance of anti-government messages spread by violent extremists.
- (4) And the fourth vital effort I'd like to briefly mention is where our military and intelligence professionals work closely with local government forces to help identify, locate, pursue and apprehend individual extremists. These operations take place not only in Iraq and Afghanistan, but in other countries as well—places like southern Somalia, northern Chad, Kenya, Yemen, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Colombia, among several others.

Together, these four kinds of effort contribute enormously to our fight against violent extremism. As Secretary Gates has noted on several occasions, the most important military component in this struggle is not the fighting we do ourselves, but how well we enable and empower our partners to defend and govern themselves. Further, the U.S. military's engagement in these activities helps to undermine the violent extremists' attempts to establish legitimacy for their ideology of hatred, death and destruction.

Credibility, rapport, trust, and cultural competence are all vital for the success of these military contributions to the fight against violent extremists. To that end, the U.S. military should certainly be commended for the dramatic changes we have seen in the education provided to soldiers and officers over the last decade.

However, despite their many successes, as many have already observed the military efforts in this fight are necessary, but insufficient. Our military cannot and should not be at the center of the overall effort to combat violent extremism. While there is much that our men and women in uniform are doing very well to support this fight, military forces alone cannot defeat violent extremism. In particular, as others have already noted, there is a need for greater involvement by non-military U.S. Government agencies in two "soft

power" related areas of activity I have just described: communications, and civil society development.

In the absence of these other agencies having a physical presence in conflict zones, the U.S. military has assumed the lion's share of responsibility for doing what needs to be done. After all, that is to be expected of the military approach—soldiers and officers see that something needs to be done, the success of their mission depends on it, so they figure out how to get it done as effectively as they can. This is only natural, and it is a vital contribution to the fight against violent extremism—as I noted before, when trying to combat the ways in which violent extremists try to influence a local population, there is no substitute for physical presence. Of course, in many cases civilian experts have played a vital role in the success of these efforts, especially those serving on Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan and more recently in Iraq. These PRTs have brought together civilians experienced in agriculture, governance, and other aspects of development to work alongside the military in improving the lives of the local population and helping strengthen the perceived legitimacy of the central governments in those countries.

However, despite many successes, the need is still there for experts from USAID, the Departments of Agriculture, Energy, Education, and so forth to be more engaged in the fight wherever they can. There is so much need for assistance, no doubt there is ample room for everyone to contribute meaningfully, including NGOs, IGOs and the private sector.

In closing, let me paraphrase something that Secretary Gates said a few years ago, something that I discuss often with the cadets I teach at West Point. Countering violent extremism requires economic development, institution-building and the rule of law, promoting internal reconciliation, good governance, providing basic services to the people, training and equipping indigenous military and police forces, strategic communications, and more—these, along with security, are essential ingredients for long-term success. Our military forces are engaged, to some degree or another, across this entire spectrum of activity in support of the broader fight against violent extremism. But in my view, our long-term success will depend on how well the government as a whole works together to defeat violent extremist groups, both at home and abroad.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this committee. I look forward to answering your questions.

Notes

¹ In preparing this testimony, COL Michael Meese, Head of the Department of Social Sciences at West Point, Dr. Assaf Moghadam and Mr. Don Rassler provided insights and assistance for which I am most grateful.

² For an extensive review of the various motivations behind terrorist activity, see James J.F. Forest, ed., *The Making of a Terrorist: Recruitment, Training and Root Causes* (3 volumes; Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005) and James J.F. Forest, ed., *Countering Terrorism and Insurgency in the 21st Century* (3 volumes; Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007).

³ For example, see "Deadly Vanguards: A Study of Al-Qaida's Violence against Muslims," a report by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (2009), available online at http://ctc.usma.edu, and for ongoing discussion of violent extremist activities see the *CTC Sentinel*, a monthly journal published online by the Center at http://ctc.usma.edu.

⁴ This is a point of special emphasis in Kristin M. Lord, John A. Nagl and Seth D. Rosen, "Beyond Bullets: A Pragmatic Strategy to Combat Violent Islamist Extremism," Center for a New American Security (Washington, DC: June 2009).

⁵ For a thorough analysis of these issues, please see James J.F. Forest, ed. *Influence Warfare: How Terrorists and Government Fight to Shape Perceptions in a War of Ideas* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2009).

⁶ A specific example of this, focused on al Qaida, is provided in James J.F. Forest, "Influence Warfare and Modern Terrorism," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* Vol. 10, No. 1 (Winter/Spring, 2009), p. 81-90.

Secretary Robert Gates, Landon Lecture (Kansas State University) Remarks as Delivered by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Manhattan, Kansas, Monday, November 26, 2007. On the Web: http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1199