

GAO

Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Oversight,
Investigations and Management,
Committee on Homeland Security
House of Representatives

For Release on Delivery
Expected at 10:00 a.m. EDT
Friday, June 3, 2011

COMBATING TERRORISM

U.S. Government Strategies and Efforts to Deny Terrorists Safe Haven

Statement of Jacquelyn L. Williams-Bridgers
Managing Director, International Affairs and Trade



G A O

Accountability * Integrity * Reliability

Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Keating, and
Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here to discuss the report GAO is releasing today on U.S. efforts to address terrorist safe havens.¹ Terrorist safe havens provide security for terrorists, allowing them to train recruits and plan operations. U.S. officials have concluded that various terrorist incidents demonstrate the dangers emanating from terrorist safe havens, such as the November 2008 attacks in Mumbai, India, planned, in part, from safe havens in Pakistan,² and the attempted airliner bombing on December 25, 2009, planned from safe havens in Yemen. The discovery of Osama Bin Laden in a compound in Pakistan, from which, according to U.S. officials, he played an active role in al Qaeda focused on attacking the United States, makes this hearing particularly timely.

My testimony today focuses on (1) U.S. national strategies related to addressing terrorist safe havens, (2) terrorist safe havens³ identified by the Department of State (State) and the threats emanating from these havens, and (3) the extent to which the U.S. government has identified efforts to deny terrorists safe havens.

In our report, we found that U.S. national strategies emphasize the importance of denying safe haven to terrorists and that, since 2006, State has annually identified terrorist safe havens in its *Country Reports on Terrorism*. However, we also found that, although there are multiple reporting requirements, the U.S. government has not provided to Congress a comprehensive, governmentwide list of its efforts to address terrorist safe havens. We made recommendations to both State and the National Security Council to improve reporting on U.S. efforts to address terrorist safe havens. State agreed with the importance of comprehensive information regarding U.S. efforts to address terrorist safe havens, but did not agree that this information needs to be included in the *Country*

¹GAO, *Combating Terrorism: U.S. Government Should Improve Its Reporting on Terrorist Safe Havens*, [GAO-11-561](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 3, 2011).

²See GAO, *Combating Terrorism: The United States Lacks Comprehensive Plan to Destroy the Terrorist Threat and Close the Safe Haven in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas*, [GAO-08-622](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 17, 2008).

³The 2006 *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* states that, in addition to physical terrorist safe havens in geographic territories, terrorist safe havens can also be nonphysical or virtual, existing within legal, cyber, and financial systems. In this statement, however, we focus on physical terrorist safe havens.

Reports on Terrorism. The National Security Council reviewed the report but provided no comments on the recommendation.

U.S. National Strategies Emphasize the Importance of Denying Safe Havens to Terrorists

The United States highlights the denial of safe haven to terrorists as a key national security concern in several U.S. government strategic documents. For example, National Security Strategies released in 2002, 2006, and 2010 emphasize the importance of denying safe haven to terrorists. The current *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, which was last updated September 2006, also stresses the importance of eliminating terrorist safe havens. The document identifies eliminating terrorist safe havens as a priority action against which all elements of national power—including military, diplomatic, financial, intelligence, and law enforcement—should be applied. According to National Security Staff officials, an updated *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* is currently being drafted and its release is expected in the coming months. However, these officials stated that denying safe haven to terrorists will remain an important element of U.S. counterterrorism strategy.

In addition to national strategies, plans issued by various U.S. agencies, such as the Departments of Defense (DOD), Justice (DOJ), and State/U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), as well as the *National Intelligence Strategy* issued by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, include language emphasizing the importance of addressing safe havens. Figure 1 shows excerpts from these documents, which discuss terrorist safe havens. However, other agencies that are involved in U.S. efforts to address terrorist safe havens do not include specific language on safe havens in their strategic plans. For example, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)—which contributes to the law enforcement element of U.S. national power—does not specifically address safe havens in its strategic plan but does have a goal to “protect the homeland from dangerous people,” which includes objectives related to effective border control.

Figure 1: Selected U.S. Government Strategic Documents Emphasizing the Importance of Denying Safe Haven to Terrorists



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. and agency strategic documents.

State’s Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism coordinates policies and programs of U.S. agencies to counter terrorism overseas. According to State, the Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism works with all appropriate elements of the U.S. government to ensure integrated and effective counterterrorism efforts that utilize diplomacy, economic power, intelligence, law enforcement, and military power. These elements include those in the White House, DOD, DHS, DOJ, State, the Department of the Treasury (Treasury), USAID, and the intelligence community. For instance, State funds programs to build the capacity of U.S. foreign

partners to counter terrorism financing implemented by agencies such as DHS, Treasury, and DOJ.

Since 2006, State Has Annually Identified Terrorist Safe Havens Posing Risks to U.S. National Security

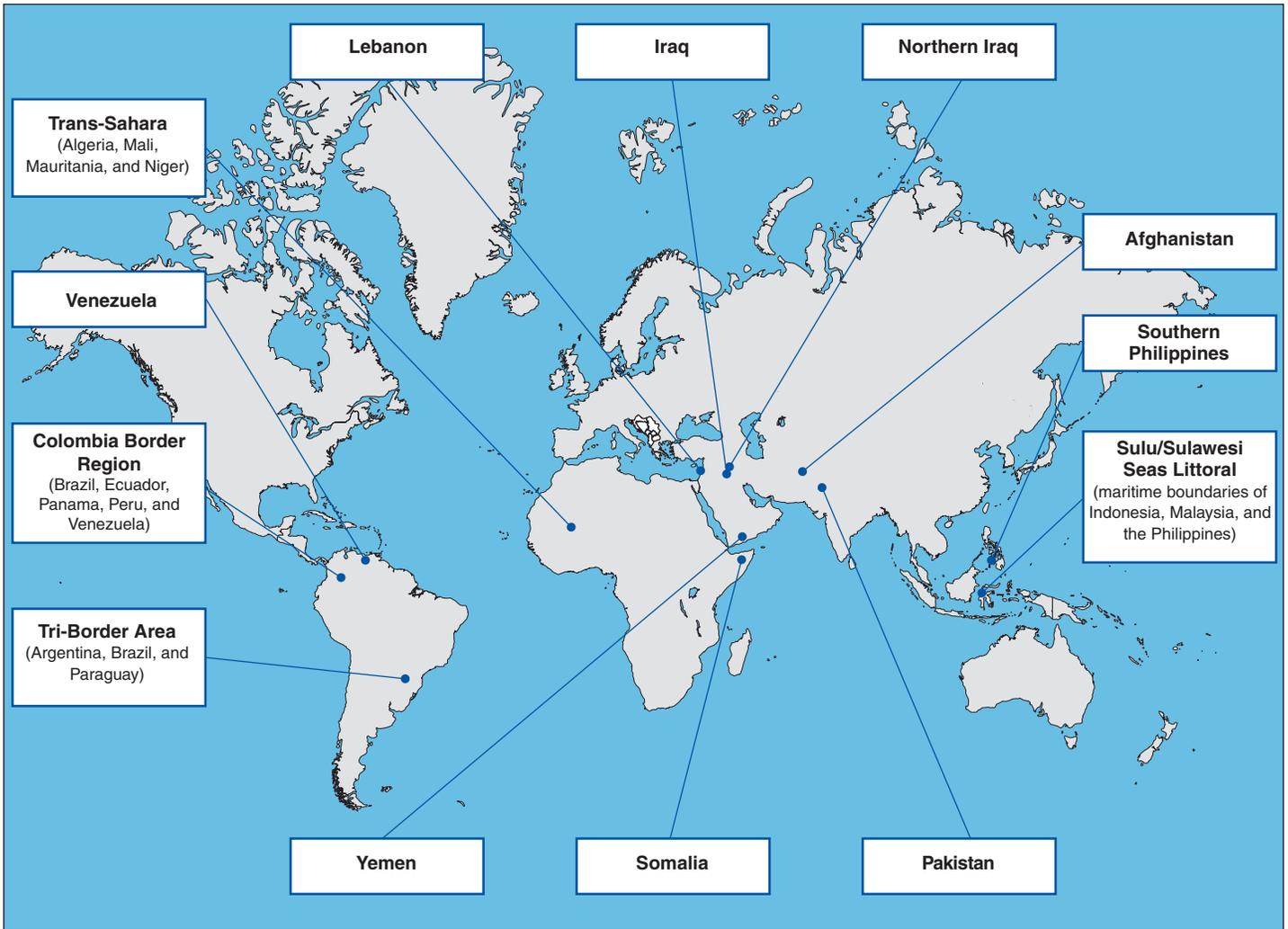
The Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 (IRTPA)⁴ requires State to include a detailed assessment in its annual *Country Reports on Terrorism* with respect to each foreign country whose territory is being used as a terrorist sanctuary, also known as a terrorist safe haven.⁵ State defines terrorist safe havens as “ungoverned, under-governed, or ill-governed areas of a country and non-physical areas where terrorists that constitute a threat to U.S. national security interests are able to organize, plan, raise funds, communicate, recruit, train, and operate in relative security because of inadequate governance capacity, political will, or both.” Since 2006, State has identified existing terrorist safe havens in a dedicated chapter of its *Country Reports on Terrorism*.⁶ As shown in figure 2, State identified 13 terrorist safe havens in its August 2010 report.

⁴P.L. 108-458, section 7102.

⁵We use the term terrorist safe haven, which, according to State, has the same meaning as terrorist sanctuaries.

⁶State annually releases the *Country Reports on Terrorism*. State’s August 2010 report includes a strategic overview of terrorist threats and country-by-country discussions of foreign government counterterrorism cooperation. While released by State’s Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, the *Country Reports on Terrorism* incorporates the views of the National Counterterrorism Center and National Security Staff, as well as key agencies involved in addressing international terrorism.

Figure 2: Terrorist Safe Havens Identified in State's Country Reports on Terrorism released in August 2010



Sources: Department of State's August 2010 *Country Reports on Terrorism*; Map Resources (map).

Terrorist safe havens pose a threat to U.S. national security. The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (9/11 Commission) noted that safe haven in Afghanistan allowed al Qaeda the operational space to gather recruits and build logistical networks to undertake planning for the attacks on September 11, 2001. State reports that denying safe haven is central to combating terrorism, which it cited as the United States' top security threat. According to U.S. agencies, a variety of groups that pose threats to the United States operate in countries identified by State as terrorist safe havens. For example:

-
- *Pakistan:* Various terrorist organizations operate in Pakistan. First, al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden was located in a compound in Pakistan from which U.S. officials have stated he was actively involved in planning attacks against the United States. Additionally, according to State, al Qaeda also uses the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) to launch attacks in Afghanistan, train and recruit terrorists, and plan global operations. State also reports that the Pakistani Taliban has used the FATA to plan attacks against civilian and military targets across Pakistan. The Pakistani Taliban have claimed responsibility for several attacks against U.S. interests, including an attack on the U.S. Consulate in Peshawar in April 2010. Moreover, according to the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), the Pakistani Taliban has repeatedly threatened to attack the U.S. homeland and claimed responsibility for the failed vehicle bombing in New York City's Times Square in May 2010. In addition, according to State, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba—the group responsible for attacks in Mumbai, India, in November 2008, which killed at least 183 people—continues to plan operations from Pakistan and views American interests as legitimate targets.
 - *Yemen:* The foreign terrorist organization al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is based in Yemen. According to the NCTC, AQAP is pursuing a global agenda. For example, the group attempted to bomb a plane headed to the United States on December 25, 2009. AQAP also claimed responsibility for the attempted package bombings of cargo planes in October 2010. More recently, in response to the killing of Osama Bin Laden, AQAP issued a press release vowing revenge against the United States. In addition, members of AQAP have been named Specially Designated Nationals by the United States government. In July 2010, the United States designated Anwar al-Aulaqi, a U.S. citizen and key leader for AQAP, for supporting acts of terrorism and for acting for or on behalf of AQAP.
 - *Somalia:* Al-Shabaab is a foreign terrorist organization active in Somalia. Al-Shabaab has claimed responsibility for several bombings and shootings throughout Somalia, as well as the July 2010 suicide bomb attacks in Kampala, Uganda, which killed more than 70 people. State reports that rank-and-file members of al-Shabaab are predominantly interested in issues within Somalia, rather than pursuing a global agenda. However, NCTC and State note that al-Shabaab's core leadership is linked ideologically to al Qaeda and that some members of the group previously trained and fought with al Qaeda in Afghanistan. In 2009, the Deputy Director of Intelligence at the NCTC testified that a number of young Somali-American men traveled to Somalia, possibly to train and fight with al-Shabaab, including one who

conducted a suicide bombing attack. While noting there is no specific evidence that the Americans previously trained in Somalia planned to conduct attacks inside the United States, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has expressed concern that this threat remains a possibility. In August 2010, the FBI arrested two U.S. citizens and indicted 12 others, including five U.S. citizens, on charges of providing support to al-Shabaab.

The U.S. Government Has Not Fully Addressed Reporting Requirements to Identify Efforts to Deny Terrorists Safe Haven

The U.S. government has not fully addressed reporting requirements to identify U.S. efforts to deny safe haven to terrorists. Congress required the President to submit reports outlining U.S. government efforts to deny or disrupt terrorist safe havens in two laws—the IRTPA and the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2010.

The IRTPA required the President to submit a report to Congress that includes an outline of the strategies, tactics, and tools the U.S. government uses to disrupt or eliminate the security provided to terrorists by terrorist safe havens,⁷ and recommended that State update the report annually, to the extent feasible, in its *Country Reports on Terrorism*.⁸ In response to these provisions, State submitted a report to Congress in April 2006, which it has updated annually as part of its *Country Reports on Terrorism*. These reports include a section on U.S. strategies, tactics, and tools that identifies several U.S. efforts to address terrorist safe havens. In the *Country Reports on Terrorism* released in August 2010, State identified several U.S. efforts for addressing terrorist safe havens, including programs such as State’s Regional Strategic Initiative and Antiterrorism Assistance programs.

However, State’s August 2010 *Country Reports on Terrorism* does not fully identify U.S. efforts to deny terrorists safe haven. For example:

- *Some State-funded efforts are not included:* Selected State strategic documents⁹ identify efforts funded by State that may contribute to

⁷P.L. 108-458, Section 7120(b).

⁸P.L. 108-458, Section 7102(d)(2)(E).

⁹We reviewed the FY 2012 Mission Strategic and Resource Plans (MSRP) for the Philippines, Somalia, and Yemen, submitted in April 2010, which included program funding information for goals related to addressing terrorist safe havens for fiscal years 2009 through 2015.

denying terrorists safe haven—such as Foreign Military Financing activities and USAID development assistance—that were not included in the August 2010 *Country Reports on Terrorism*. In addition, agency officials identified additional State-funded efforts that may contribute to addressing terrorist safe havens—such as activities funded through State’s Peacekeeping Operations and State-funded DHS training to combat money laundering and bulk cash smuggling—but were not included in the report.

- *Efforts funded by other U.S. agencies are not included:* For example, according to DOD officials, the Department’s Afghanistan and Iraq Security Forces Funds and Section 1206 program efforts to train and equip the security forces abroad address terrorist safe havens but are not included in State’s report. Additionally, according to DOJ and Treasury, their training programs to build the capacity of foreign partners to counter terrorism financing address terrorist safe havens, but they are also not included in State’s report.

In the IRTPA, Congress noted that it should be the policy of the United States to implement a coordinated strategy to prevent terrorists from using safe havens and to assess the tools used to assist foreign governments in denying terrorists safe haven. State’s report is incomplete without a comprehensive overview of its own contributions and those of its various interagency partners to address terrorist safe havens.

To enhance the comprehensiveness of State’s reporting on U.S. efforts to deny safe haven to terrorists, we recommended that State include a governmentwide list of U.S. efforts to address terrorist safe havens when it updates the report requested under the IRTPA.¹⁰ In response, State concurred that reporting on U.S. efforts to deny terrorist safe havens should be more comprehensive. However, State did not agree that such a list should be part of its annual *Country Reports on Terrorism*, citing the fact that they have completed other reporting requirements related to counterterrorism. We maintain that the provisions in the IRTPA recommend annual updates related to U.S. efforts to address terrorist safe havens be included in the *Country Reports on Terrorism*. Moreover, while it is possible that other reports produced by State address IRTPA provisions, the antiterrorism report cited by State in its comments does not constitute a governmentwide list of U.S. efforts to address terrorist

¹⁰[GAO-11-561](#).

safe havens as the report does not include the contributions of key agencies, such as DOD.

In addition to the provisions in the IRTPA, Congress demonstrated an ongoing interest in the identification of U.S. efforts to deny terrorist safe havens in the NDAA for FY 2010. The conference report accompanying the act noted that existing executive branch reporting on counterterrorism does not address the full scope of U.S. activities or assess overall effectiveness. The NDAA for FY 2010 requires the President to submit to Congress a report on U.S. counterterrorism strategy, including an assessment of the scope, status, and progress of U.S. counterterrorism efforts in fighting al Qaeda and its affiliates and a provision to create a list of U.S. counterterrorism efforts relating to the denial of terrorist safe havens. The required report is intended to help Congress in conducting oversight, enhance the public's understanding of how well the government is combating terrorism, and assist the administration in identifying and overcoming related challenges. As of March 2011, no report had been submitted to Congress. While National Security Staff officials taking the lead on the report stated they were working on a draft, they were unsure when it would be completed.

To address this reporting gap, we recommended that the National Security Council, in collaboration with relevant agencies as appropriate, complete the requirements of the NDAA of FY 2010 to report to Congress on a list of U.S. efforts related to the denial of terrorist safe havens.¹¹ The National Security Council reviewed our report but provided no comments on the recommendation.

Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Keating, and members of the Subcommittee, this completes my prepared statement. I would be happy to respond to any questions you or other Members of the Subcommittee may have at this time.

¹¹[GAO-11-561](#).

Scope and Methodology

This statement is based on our body of work examining U.S. counterterrorism policies and efforts, particularly those regarding terrorist safe havens and reported in [GAO-11-561](#) to be released today. To address our objectives, we reviewed and analyzed relevant national strategies, key congressional legislation, State's *Country Reports on Terrorism*, and other documents related to U.S. efforts to address terrorist safe havens. Additionally, we discussed U.S. strategies and efforts related to terrorist safe havens with U.S. officials from DOD, DHS, DOJ, State, Treasury, USAID, the National Security Staff, and the intelligence community. We also spoke to subject matter experts from academia, government, and nongovernmental organizations. We performed our work in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence we obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

For questions regarding this statement, please contact Jacquelyn Williams-Bridgers at (202) 512-3101 or williamsbridgersj@gao.gov or Charles Michael Johnson, Jr. at (202) 512-7331 or johnsoncm@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement. Jason Bair, Assistant Director; Christy Bilardo, Kathryn Bolduc, Lynn Cothorn, Martin de Alteriis, Eileen Larence, Mary Moutsos, John Pendleton, and Elizabeth Repko made key contributions in preparing this statement.

This is a work of the U.S. government and is not subject to copyright protection in the United States. The published product may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without further permission from GAO. However, because this work may contain copyrighted images or other material, permission from the copyright holder may be necessary if you wish to reproduce this material separately.

GAO's Mission

The Government Accountability Office, the audit, evaluation, and investigative arm of Congress, exists to support Congress in meeting its constitutional responsibilities and to help improve the performance and accountability of the federal government for the American people. GAO examines the use of public funds; evaluates federal programs and policies; and provides analyses, recommendations, and other assistance to help Congress make informed oversight, policy, and funding decisions. GAO's commitment to good government is reflected in its core values of accountability, integrity, and reliability.

Obtaining Copies of GAO Reports and Testimony

The fastest and easiest way to obtain copies of GAO documents at no cost is through GAO's Web site (www.gao.gov). Each weekday afternoon, GAO posts on its Web site newly released reports, testimony, and correspondence. To have GAO e-mail you a list of newly posted products, go to www.gao.gov and select "E-mail Updates."

Order by Phone

The price of each GAO publication reflects GAO's actual cost of production and distribution and depends on the number of pages in the publication and whether the publication is printed in color or black and white. Pricing and ordering information is posted on GAO's Web site, <http://www.gao.gov/ordering.htm>.

Place orders by calling (202) 512-6000, toll free (866) 801-7077, or TDD (202) 512-2537.

Orders may be paid for using American Express, Discover Card, MasterCard, Visa, check, or money order. Call for additional information.

To Report Fraud, Waste, and Abuse in Federal Programs

Contact:

Web site: www.gao.gov/fraudnet/fraudnet.htm

E-mail: fraudnet@gao.gov

Automated answering system: (800) 424-5454 or (202) 512-7470

Congressional Relations

Ralph Dawn, Managing Director, dawnr@gao.gov, (202) 512-4400
U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7125
Washington, DC 20548

Public Affairs

Chuck Young, Managing Director, youngc1@gao.gov, (202) 512-4800
U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7149
Washington, DC 20548

