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Times Square Terror Plot: The Right Formula for Stopping Terrorism Has Not Changed

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Saturday's near-miss car bombing in Times Square is the 31st known foiled terror plot against the United States since 9/11. This attempted attack, however, was nearly identical to last year's Christmas Day plot: committed by a known enemy, from a known terror network, using a known tactic. Given these similarities, the inability of authorities to stop Saturday's plot raises serious questions about the federal counterterrorism effort.

Relying on sheer luck is a strategy that will eventually fail. Successful counterterrorism requires dedicated national leadership and a commitment to stopping terror plots early in the process. Such a commitment will require robust information sharing with state and local law enforcement and friends and allies overseas, quality intelligence gathering, and counterterrorism operations aimed at rooting out terrorist sanctuaries.

31 Plots Foiled. The U.S. has indeed been successful in fighting terrorism since 9/11. The 31 plots foiled since 9/11, however, are a reminder that terrorists have not relented in their desire to kill Americans. But these plots also provide a useful indicator of what works in terms of counterterrorism, including:

- *The need to share information.* Sharing information with international allies and with state and local law enforcement has proven invaluable in stopping terrorism. For instance, in 2006, the U.S. and United Kingdom were able to work together to take down a plot to blow up 10 planes at once using liquid explosives. The information sharing between the two countries led to

the communication of intelligence that would ultimately stop the plot before it ever literally got off the ground.

- *The need for robust intelligence.* Law enforcement will be successful only if it has quality intelligence upon which to act. Laws that help in the collection of intelligence, such as the PATRIOT Act, are vitally important. For instance, in 2009, law enforcement authorities—in part from their use of the PATRIOT Act's roving surveillance authority provisions—were able to stop a plot to use beauty supplies to blow up the New York subway system.
- *The need to go after sanctuaries.* Terrorist organizations often take sanctuary in countries that do not have the resources or political will to oppose them. This makes anti-terrorism operations in these countries all the more important. Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, one of the 9/11 masterminds and a conspirator in multiple other terror plots against the U.S., was captured in Pakistan, which has long struggled with these groups within its borders.

These efforts together can help to break up terrorist organizations, frustrate operations, cut off

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sources of recruitment and funding, and ultimately prevent terrorist groups from staging attacks.

Regaining Focus. The U.S. can ill-afford to forget these lessons and get bogged down in feel-good measures that might look good on paper but accomplish very little in terms of security. As of late, the Administration has seemed more focused on equating terrorist behaviors with common criminal activities, thereby shifting America's attention away from the successes of the past nine years. Regaining the right focus should include the following steps:

- **Support counterterrorism authorities.** Tools such as the PATRIOT Act, which modernized intelligence and legal authorities to fight the war on terrorism, have helped to stop attacks similar to Times Square. Congress and the Department of Homeland Security should support these authorities and make them permanent.
- **Increase visa coordination.** Careful screening of those who wish to come into the U.S. allows for the opportunity to apprehend terrorists and other criminals before they enter the country. Yet the Obama Administration has yet to place visa coordination at the top of its agenda. In fact, the Visa Security Program—which would provide background screening on visa applicants—has not been deployed at most high-risk airports. At the same time, Congress has let the Visa Waiver Program—which requires pre-screening of visa waiver participants and robust information sharing with member countries—to come to a standstill. Both efforts should be allowed to expand.
- **Continue anti-terrorism operations overseas.** It is vital that the U.S. work in and with countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Somalia to

stop terrorist organizations from staging operations overseas.

- **Develop a framework for terrorist detainees.** The lack of a lawful detention framework for captured terrorists inhibits the collection of valuable intelligence—intelligence that can help bring terrorists to justice and help stop future plots. The Administration should develop a U.S. detention policy for detainees who cannot be tried safely in federal courts.
- **Consolidate oversight of homeland security.** More often than not, Congress has focused on providing “checkbook security”: spending a lot of money on new security paradigms that look good on paper but contribute very little to the security of Americans. Much of this is the result of the chaotic system of congressional oversight. With 108 committees, subcommittees, and commissions with oversight over the Department, politics, rather than smart security, often rules the process. Consolidating oversight would help ease this problem. Congressional leadership should make such consolidation a priority.

Luck Is Not Enough. The formula for fighting terrorism remains the same, and it is clear that the Administration cannot rely on sheer luck to fight terror attacks. Ignoring the threat will not help either, as the past nine years have proven that terrorists will not relent in their desire to murder Americans. The best way forward is to equip authorities with a full arsenal of tools to stop terrorist attacks in their infancy.

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