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Conference on Global Terrorism

New York City, New York

November 3, 2014

Fighting Terrorism in the Digital Age

Remarks prepared for delivery.

Good morning, it's an honor to be here.

I have been on the job as FBI Director now for one year and two months. I like to express my tenure in terms of months, and I joke that I have eight years and 10 months to go, as if I'm incarcerated.

But the truth is, I love this job and I wake up every day excited to be part of the FBI.

I've traveled all over the U.S. and abroad to visit my troops—so far I've visited 51 of our 56 field offices, and 14 of our 64 legats overseas. What I've seen on my travels has confirmed what I have long believed—that the FBI is filled with amazing people, doing an amazing array of things around the world, and doing them well.

But we confront many serious threats—and these threats are constantly evolving. Today, I want to give you an overview of what we're facing, what we're doing about it, and what we need to do to make sure we have the tools to keep us safe from harm.

When I began this job a year ago, I had been gone from government for almost a decade. I'm often asked how the terrorist threat has changed and whether I think the

threat is more or less dangerous today than in the days, weeks, or months following 9/11.

First off, let me say, counterterrorism remains the FBI's number one priority. To me, the terrorism threat has changed in two ways. First, the core al Qaeda tumor in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region has been reduced significantly, thanks to our men and women in uniform working with our allies around the world.

But at the same time, that cancer has metastasized. The progeny of al Qaeda—groups like al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Khorasan, and ISIL—have sprung up like secondary tumors in ungoverned or poorly governed spaces in North Africa, the Gulf, and the Mediterranean.

These groups offer terrorism training and experience to people all over the world, including those here in the United States. These incredibly misguided people think the way to impart meaning in their lives is to wage jihad. This remains a huge, diverse, and significant threat to us. I go to sleep each night and wake up each morning worrying about it.

ISIL today occupies much of Syria and Iraq. The world has watched in horror as ISIL savages have beheaded captives, and called for attacks on law enforcement, military, journalists, and Western civilians.

Khorasan is also at the top of my list—for a couple of reasons. One, it's a collection of experienced and well-funded terrorists operating in a safe haven of Syria, where we don't have complete visibility. The challenge is that given this limited visibility, it is difficult to say whether they would attack us three months from now, three weeks from now, or tomorrow. We need to assume and act as if their threat is imminent.

That's why we are watching these foreign fighters or would-be foreign fighters, and have been, for months. Syria has become a matter of homeland security, principally because of this issue of foreign fighters. And so, monitoring and interdicting the travel of those who might want to leave this country and go there is an area of top concern, right now.

And while I'm concerned about the going over, I'm even more concerned about the coming back. There will come a terrorist diaspora out of Syria and Iraq, just as there was out of the Afghanistan war with the Soviet Union in the 1980s. You can draw a line between that terrorist diaspora and 9/11. The outflow from Syria and elsewhere will be much larger and harder to track—and we cannot allow it to follow a similar line to a future tragedy.

We have a pretty good handle on those we know who went and came back. But we're constantly asking ourselves: Are there any that we're missing? And who are we missing who is in the midst of trying to go?

It's challenging. We have an enormous, wonderful, free country. There are thousands of ways to get from the United States to Syria, and there are tens of thousands of Americans who travel for legitimate purposes every single day.

But we have to work together with our federal, state, local, and international partners to identify and stop those who are coming after us.

So the evolution and the dispersion of the threat itself is the first change. The second way in which the terrorism threat has changed is through the explosion of terrorist propaganda on the Internet.

Groups like ISIL have created targeted, slick media campaigns to recruit fighters and people who would be spouses of fighters. They're trying to attract them from all over the West to come to their so-called caliphate to start families in their warped world.

Last month we intercepted three Denver school girls who were trying to make their way to Syria via Germany to join ISIL. As the FBI Director, I find this alarming. As the father of teenage girls, this development is all the more horrifying.

The sheer volume of terrorist-related material on the Internet makes more difficult the challenge from homegrown violent extremists. Some call them lone wolves. I don't like the term. It conveys dignity they don't deserve. I think of them as lone rats. These are people who are not directed by al Qaeda, but who are inspired, radicalized, and trained through this propaganda to emerge from their basement or their bedroom and do

something terrible. It's very hard for us to find and stop them before they take action. The October 22 attack on a Canadian soldier and attempted rampage inside the Canadian Parliament is a prime example of this.

So in these respects, today's threat is more worrisome. The popping up of al Qaeda's offshoots in safe havens, the explosion of terrorist propaganda on the Internet, and the ability for groups to recruit and motivate extremists without ever having to leave their homes has allowed this terror metastasis to bloom.

One of the ways we stay ahead of threats like terrorism is, of course, through intelligence. And based on what I've learned over the past year as FBI Director, I've decided that intelligence is one of a few key areas I want to focus on in the near term—in particular, how we share the intelligence we all need to do our jobs well.

I like to describe the FBI in a single sentence, which is that we are a national security and law enforcement organization that uses, collects, and shares intelligence in everything that we do. The FBI has always been in the intelligence business. That's our great gift—we find stuff out. And we're getting better at finding stuff out, figuring out what to do with it, asking ourselves what we don't know, and what we need to know.

I also want to make sure that we are using that ability to maximum benefit for all of our responsibilities and throughout the United States government. The stuff that we find out, are we sharing it in a good way, are we using it in a smart way? That's what intelligence transformation is.

We are making changes inside the Bureau. That is because if the FBI is truly going to be more thoughtful in integrating and thinking about intelligence, we need to drive that into everything we do—criminal, cyber, counterintelligence, counterterrorism, training, security, and even human resources. We call this being threat based and intelligence driven. We must routinely ask ourselves: What are all the bad things that can happen in the United States that the FBI might be able to do something about? What are all the threats that this country faces?

At the FBI, our biggest fear is not only what we don't know, but what we do know but have not yet connected. That key fact, that nugget of information, had we pushed it up, had we shared it with others and connected the dots—could that information have prevented an attack?

We've made a lot of progress since 9/11, and we're headed in the right direction, but there's a lot of work ahead of us to make information-sharing and collaboration stronger and more fluid. We know that we cannot do this on our own. That is why in this time of heightened threats, we must remain vigilant and work together as closely as possible if we are to succeed in finding and stopping extremists before they act.

Last week I spoke to the International Association of Chiefs of Police. Many people think of terrorism as an issue only for the feds, but state and local law enforcement, particularly here in New York with the NYPD, play an irreplaceable role in our counterterrorism efforts. Across the country, state and local departments contribute hugely to the work of our joint terrorism task forces, and it is their officers who are often the first to notice something unusual happening in their communities. The changing threat landscape will present a great challenge over the next decade—and we will continue to count on their help.

We need to bring everyone to the table. There's been some talk of turf battles between federal agencies, and I want to make it clear: I have no patience for turf battles. I don't think the American people have much patience for them either. I think they would go crazy if they heard that agencies fight with each other over who gets to do what. It reminds me of the wide receiver who complains that the quarterback is throwing to another receiver and not to him. Here's what I'd say to that guy: "Run great routes, get open, and every time you touch the ball, score."

The idea of who is in charge or who holds control has never mattered to me. What matters to me is that we are doing everything we can—together—to keep the people we serve safe from harm.

We also rely heavily on the eyes and ears of our community partners and private citizens to stay ahead of the evolving terrorist threat. We all need to familiarize

ourselves with the signs of radicalization. As I've long said, if it makes the hair stand up on the back of your neck, you need to tell somebody. Given the complexity of the threat and the danger posed by these so-called lone rats and larger, more organized terrorist groups overseas, our safety will be a collective effort.

I want to turn to one of the most pressing issues we face, known as Going Dark.

A combination of outdated laws and rapid changes in technology is making it increasingly hard for us to access the evidence we need to prosecute crime and prevent terrorism, even with lawful authority.

You may have read about my position on this—I spoke at the Brookings Institution a few weeks back. As I mentioned then, my goal is not to tell people what to do, or how to think, but I do want to start a national conversation about this issue. The Going Dark problem has accelerated in recent years. The inability to conduct lawful, real-time interception pursuant to court orders and the emergence of default encryption settings promise to make the challenge to law enforcement markedly worse.

In the past, conducting electronic surveillance was more straightforward. We identified a target phone with a single carrier, being used by a bad guy. We obtained a court order for a wiretap, and, under the supervision of a judge, we collected the evidence we needed for prosecution. Today, there are countless providers, networks, devices, apps, and ways of communicating. The bad guys have those same devices, the same networks, and the same apps to target their victims, and to cover up their tracks.

It makes it tough for us to keep up. Because if a suspected criminal is in his car and switches from cellular coverage to WiFi, we may be out of luck. If he goes from one app to another, or from cellular voice service to messaging, we may lose him.

I was taken aback when the good people at Apple and Google announced that their new smartphone operating systems will encrypt data by default. This means the companies themselves won't be able to unlock phones, laptops, and tablets to reveal photos, documents, e-mail, and recordings stored within, even pursuant to a court order.

The whole world is online—in one way or another, at every moment. The more we as a society rely on these devices, the more important they are to those of us in law enforcement. That's because in case after case, from homicides to drug trafficking, domestic abuse to child exploitation, critical evidence to put the bad guys away came from smartphones, hard drives, and online communication. Today, we're seeing more and more cases where we believe significant evidence resides on a phone or a laptop, but we can't crack the password.

The Going Dark challenge increases the risk that we in law enforcement will miss out on predators who exploit the most vulnerable among us, miss out on violent criminals who target our communities, or miss out on a terrorist cell using social media to recruit, plan, and execute an attack.

I'm deeply concerned about this, both as a law enforcement officer and a citizen. I am a huge believer in the rule of law. But I also believe that no one in this country should be above or beyond the law. I believe very much that we need to follow the letter of the law to examine the contents of someone's closet or someone's smartphone. But the notion that the marketplace could create something that would prevent that closet from ever being opened, even with a properly obtained court order, makes no sense to me.

I believe people should be skeptical of government power. I am. This country was founded by people who were worried about government power. So they divided government power among three branches, with checks and balances for each. And they wrote a Bill of Rights to ensure that the "papers and effects" of the people are secure from unreasonable searches.

But the way I see it, the means by which we conduct surveillance through telecommunication carriers and those Internet service providers who have developed lawful intercept solutions, is an example of government operating in the way the founders intended—that is, the executive, the legislative, and the judicial branches proposing, enacting, executing, and overseeing legislation, pursuant to the rule of law.

I've been talking a lot about this issue recently. My concern is that in a post-Snowden world, the pendulum has swung too far in a direction of fear and mistrust, based on a failure to understand why we in law enforcement do what we do, and how we do it.

It is time to have open and honest debates about liberty and security. Some have suggested there is a conflict between liberty and security. I disagree. At our best, we in law enforcement, national security, and public safety are looking for security that enhances liberty. When a city posts police officers at a dangerous playground, security has promoted liberty—the freedom to let a child play without fear.

The people of the FBI are sworn to protect both security and liberty. It isn't a question of conflict. We must care deeply about protecting liberty through due process of law, while also safeguarding the citizens we serve—in every investigation.

I hope you'll help me continue this conversation in your own communities, with the private sector, and with our elected leaders. We need to explain to Congress and the American public how Going Dark threatens our ability to protect this nation and its citizens. There will come a day, and it comes every day in our business, when it will matter a great deal to innocent people that we in law enforcement can't access certain types of data or information, even with legal authorization.

These are tough issues. I've never been someone who is a scaremonger. But I'm in a dangerous business. I want to ensure that when our nation discusses limiting the court-authorized tools we use to investigate suspected criminals and terrorists, that we all clearly understand what society gains—and what we all stand to lose. We need to make sure the American public understands the work we do, and the means by which we do it.

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There is no question that our world has changed in recent years and that terrorist threats continue to evolve. But as things change, certain things remain the same—our collective desire to keep our country and our loved ones safe.

It is this wish for continued peace and prosperity that the good people of the FBI, with your help, strive to protect each and every day. I hope this conference provides a new perspective on the threats we face and what we need to do together to be safe and strong.

Thank you for having me here today.