

Keynote Address: Latest Developments in Homeland Security

Speaker: Honorable Jeh Johnson, Secretary,
United States Department of Homeland Security



Secretary Johnson began his address by talking “about what’s going on in the Department of Homeland Security” (the “Department”). He noted that the Department has a workforce of 240,000 people and is the third largest department within the federal government. The Department is responsible for the nation’s counter-terrorism efforts; the enforcement of immigration laws; aviation, border, maritime and cyber-security; protection of critical infrastructure; protection against biochemical threats; protection of national leaders; and responses to natural disasters.

Secretary Johnson observed that counter-terrorism “is and should continue to be the cornerstone of the Homeland Security mission.” He indicated that the terrorist threat against the United States has “changed fundamentally” over the last twelve-and-a-half years because the threat has “morphed,” is more decentralized and more diffuse.

One of the Department’s concerns relates to the new phenomenon of foreign fighters traveling into Syria and returning to their homelands. Another concern involves the threat of domestic-based terrorists. Aviation security is “vital,” and Secretary Johnson has been advocating for what he called overseas preclearance which is a program establishing a Customs and Border Patrol capability and a Transportation Security Agency (“TSA”)-like capability in overseas airports that are the last point of departure to the United States.

Secretary Johnson then described an outreach initiative through which the Department partners with community-based groups and state and local law enforcement to address violent extremism in the United States.

Secretary Johnson next spoke about border security. Attempts at illegal border crossings are much lower than they used to be. There has been a recent spike in illegal migration into south Texas, however, by unaccompanied children from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. Secretary Johnson has declared a level four state of readiness within the Department in order to address the problem by, among other things, engagement with the governments of Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala.

Regarding immigration, Secretary Johnson remained optimistic that Congress would undertake comprehensive reform and mentioned that he was undertaking a review of enforcement priorities to ensure that the Department was enforcing immigration laws in a humane manner.

Cyber-security remains a priority for the Department. Secretary Johnson noted that there is renewed interest in cyber-security legislation and offered four areas in need of consideration: (i) clarifying the private sector's authority to share information with the government; (ii) clarifying the Department's authority to obtain cyber-information going to the networks of other parts of the federal government; (iii) limited liability protection for the private sector; and (iv) a data breach notice requirement. Secretary Johnson also observed that he has been meeting with business officials and looking to hire the best talent from graduate schools and universities in order to combat the threat of cyber-attacks.

Secretary Johnson then spoke about the Federal Emergency Management Agency, highlighting how it can rapidly mobilize resources to bring generators, food, water and other supplies into affected areas very quickly and how it can coordinate with state and local government and local communities.

Secretary Johnson commented on the dedicated and professional service rendered by the United States Secret Service. He then spoke generally about management initiatives within the Department, improved morale, strategic approaches to the budget and acquisition processes, and filling Department vacancies.

Secretary Johnson concluded by noting that his job is to preserve American values and to find the right balance between our security and our values.