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CONTACT:

Adam Sharon

adam.sharon@mail.house.gov

202.225.8110, office

Ranking Member Eliot Engel Opening Statement at Hearing, “Terrorist Attack in Benghazi: The Secretary of State’s View”

Washington, D.C. – U.S. Rep. Eliot L. Engel, the top Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, delivered the below remarks as prepared for delivery at today’s committee hearing, “Terrorist Attack in Benghazi: The Secretary of State’s View.” The statement follows:

“Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this important hearing. I hope we can use this as an opportunity to seriously examine the steps we need to take to prevent a repeat of the tragedy in Benghazi, rather than engaging in “gotcha” politics that make it more difficult to achieve this bipartisan goal.

Madam Secretary, I’d like to welcome you back to our Committee and I’m glad that you are feeling better. This will likely be your final appearance before our Committee, and I wanted to take this opportunity to let you know how much I’ve appreciated your outstanding and tireless efforts to represent our country in the international community. I have no doubt that you will continue to serve our nation in some capacity, as you have for so many years, and I look forward to working with you in the future.

Mr. Chairman, this Committee has no greater responsibility than making sure that the men and women of the State Department, USAID, and other public servants who work abroad are provided the security they deserve.

We must do what we can to minimize the threats faced by our diplomats and aid workers, but we must also recognize that some risk is inherent in the practice of effective diplomacy. We can’t advance America’s interests around the world if we isolate ourselves behind embassy walls or limit the deployment of our diplomats to low-risk environments. Let’s not learn the wrong lesson from today’s hearing.

The Accountability Review Board, or ARB, convened by Secretary Clinton found a number of failures that resulted from a lack of leadership in two State Department bureaus, as well as woefully inadequate local security in Benghazi. Clearly, mistakes were made.

But let's be absolutely clear: President Obama was not responsible for the Benghazi attack, any more than President Reagan was responsible for the Marine barracks tragedy in Beirut, or President George W. Bush for 9/11.

Madam Secretary, we commend you for accepting all of the ARB recommendations, and welcome your commitment to begin implementing them by the time you leave the Department.

Even before the ARB submitted its conclusions, the Department moved to address certain shortcomings through its Increased Security Proposal. The vast majority of the funding for this proposal would come from funds previously appropriated for lower-priority programs, and I hope Congress will move without delay to give the Department the transfer authority it needs to start applying these changes.

It is important to remember that security is not a one-off endeavor. Indeed, it's a long-term responsibility and investment. In that context, the members of the ARB, led by Ambassador Thomas Pickering and Admiral Mike Mullen, highlighted the State Department's struggle to get the resources it needs. This ongoing problem has led to a culture at the Department in which some senior managers appear to be more interested in conserving resources than in achieving specific goals.

The ARB report says, quote, "The solution requires a more serious and sustained commitment from Congress to support State Department needs...", unquote. Regrettably, it's clear that Congress is still failing to meet this commitment. In the most recent State Department funding bill approved by the House appropriations committee, the Administration's request for Embassy Security, Construction and Maintenance was cut by \$112 million, and Worldwide Security Protection reduced by \$149 million. The Senate, by comparison, did not cut either account.

If we truly want to maintain a global reach, then we need to make the necessary investments in safeguarding our personnel who serve in dangerous environments.

Mr. Chairman, you have indicated your intention to work on a State Department Authorization bill, and I would like to work with you in a bipartisan manner to craft legislation that improves the Department's ability to manage its resources and provides the funding necessary to secure our people and facilities globally.

Over the next several months, our country faces the threat of sequestration and a potential government shutdown. I voted against the legislation that set up the process of sequestration because I believe that it is the responsibility of Congress to decide how much or little we should provide federal agencies and programs rather than blindly slashing all programs by more than 8 percent.

Sequestration would have a direct and severe impact on diplomatic security. It would result in fewer people safeguarding older, less secure facilities. Is that really what we want?

We should also be very concerned about a potential government shutdown, which would affect a wide range of State Department operations, from issuing passports and processing visas to managing the export of sensitive technologies. It could strand Americans abroad, erect hurdles to American businesses, and complicate our ability to serve and protect American interests worldwide.

The United States is facing new and increasingly complex challenges around the world, and the brave men and women of the State Department, USAID, and other international affairs agencies confront these challenges head-on every day. They need to know that we in Congress are supporting them and giving them the necessary tools and protection to succeed and advance U.S. interests.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for holding this hearing.

And Madam Secretary, I look forward to your testimony.”