



SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
1000 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, DC 20301-1000

SEP 26 2016

The Honorable William M. "Mac" Thornberry
Chairman
Committee on Armed Services
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

Thank you for your letter of September 23, 2016, regarding the President's veto of S. 2040, the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA). I support the President's position. We appreciate the opportunity to provide views on this important issue.

As I stated in my testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on September 22, 2016, I agree with the intent of the bill, which is to honor the families of 9/11 victims. While we are sympathetic to the intent of JASTA, its potential second- and third-order consequences could be devastating to the Department and its Service members and could undermine our important counterterrorism efforts abroad.

In general terms, JASTA would allow lawsuits in U.S. Federal Courts against foreign states for actions taken abroad that are alleged to have contributed to acts of terrorism in the United States, notwithstanding long-standing principles of sovereign immunity. Under existing law, similar lawsuits are available for actions taken abroad only by designated state sponsors of terrorism. JASTA extends the stripping of immunity to states that are not designated sponsors of terrorism, potentially subjecting many of the United States' allies and partner nations to litigation in U.S. courts.

JASTA has potentially harmful consequences for the Department of Defense and its personnel. Adoption of JASTA might result in reciprocal treatment of the United States and other countries could create exceptions to immunity that do not directly mirror those created by JASTA. This is likely to increase our country's vulnerability to lawsuits overseas and to encourage foreign governments or their courts to exercise jurisdiction over the United States or U.S. officials in situations in which we believe the United States is entitled of sovereign immunity. U.S. Service members stationed here and overseas, and especially those supporting our counterterrorism efforts, would be vulnerable to private individuals' accusations that their activities contributed to acts alleged to violate a foreign state's law. Such lawsuits could relate to actions taken by members of armed groups that received U.S. assistance or training, or misuse of U.S. military equipment by foreign forces.

First, whether the United States or our Service members have *in fact* provided support for terrorist acts or aided organizations that later commit such acts in violation of foreign laws is irrelevant to whether we would be forced to defend against lawsuits by private litigants in foreign courts. Instead, the mere allegation of their involvement could subject them to a foreign court's jurisdiction and the accompanying litigation and intrusive discovery process that goes

along with defending against such lawsuits. This could result in significant consequences even if the United States or our personnel were ultimately found not to be responsible for the alleged acts.

Second, there would be a risk of sizeable monetary damage awards in such cases, which could lead to efforts to attach U.S. Government property to satisfy those awards. Given the broad range of U.S. activities and robust presence around the world, including our Department's foreign bases and facilities abroad, we would have numerous assets vulnerable to such attempts.

Third, it is likely that litigants will seek sensitive government information in order to establish their case against either a foreign state under JASTA in U.S. courts or against the United States in a foreign court. This could include classified intelligence data and analysis, as well as sensitive operational information. While in the United States classified information could potentially be withheld in certain narrow circumstances in civil lawsuits brought by private litigants against our allies and partners, no legislation specifically protects classified information in civil actions (unlike protections afforded in criminal prosecutions) or under JASTA. Furthermore, if the United States were to be sued in foreign courts, such information would likely be sought by foreign plaintiffs, and it would be up to the foreign court whether classified or sensitive U.S. Government information sought by the litigants would be protected from disclosure. Moreover, the classified information could well be vital for our defense against the accusations. Disclosure could put the United States in the difficult position of choosing between disclosing classified or otherwise sensitive information or suffering adverse rulings and potentially large damage awards for our refusal to do so.

Relatedly, foreign lawsuits will divert resources from mission crucial tasks; they could subject our Service members and civilians, as well as contractor personnel, to depositions, subpoenas for trial testimony, and other compulsory processes both here and abroad. Indeed, such personnel might be held in civil or even criminal contempt if they refused to appear or to divulge classified or other sensitive information at the direction of a foreign court.

Finally, allowing our partners and allies – not just designated state sponsors of terrorism – to be subject to lawsuits inside the United States will inevitably undermine the trust and cooperation our forces need to accomplish their important missions. By damaging our close and effective cooperation with other countries, this could ultimately have a chilling effect on our own counterterrorism efforts.

Please let me know if there is any additional information the Department can provide.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ash Carter". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

cc:
The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member