

Statement by

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Chairwoman Harman, Ranking Member McCaul, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today to discuss al-Qa'ida's threat to the homeland.

Although al-Qa'ida is substantially weaker than it was on the eve of the 9/11 attacks, it still poses an active and immediate threat to the United States and its allies. Uncertainty about future policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan and its effect on homeland security heightens concern.

I have studied terrorism for almost forty years, and if we look at the big picture of all terrorism over time, most terrorism is local. Targets, audiences, and grievances are local, and for most groups attacking close to home is simpler and easier. Since the late 1960s, anti-American groups have spent most of their time and effort on their home territory, and it was rare for them even to target Americans or American interests abroad, much less mount attacks in the United States. Al-Qa'ida is the exception. Transnational reach is central to its identity, and it is organized to carry out this mission. As American military strikes pressure the core leadership in Pakistan, those remaining may grow more desperate to activate supporters in the United States in order to continue the struggle. Local militants may be motivated to act in order to avoid failure and the collapse of the cause. It is likely that al-Qa'ida's leaders have given up the idea of a repetition of the destructiveness of 9/11 and would settle for less spectacular but lethal attacks on civilian targets.

My statement analyzes al-Qa'ida's current organizational capacity and evaluates its intentions toward the United States.

What is al-Qa'ida?

Recent estimates place al-Qa'ida's strength at around 100 members in Afghanistan and 300 in Pakistan. Others simply say that the numbers are "below 2000." These varying estimates are misleading, perhaps even meaningless. Al-Qa'ida has always been an organization that depended as much on local initiative as on top-down direction, and in the aftermath of 9/11 it has dispersed even more. Its complex organizational structure is something between a centralized hierarchy and a decentralized flat network. It is a flexible and adaptable organization that has survived well beyond the lifespan of most other terrorist organizations.

In my view, al-Qa'ida is not a global social movement. I offer this observation because defining it as such implies that it is a popular movement with extensive grass-roots support in its constituent communities. I do not think this is the case. Instead it is a web of overlapping conspiracies, often piggy-backing on local conflicts and grievances. In many ways it is a transnational secret society. Clandestine cells are the norm, not rallies and demonstrations pulling in large numbers of supporters. It cannot mobilize the vast majority of Muslims. Its options are limited.

The structure of the organization can be analyzed on three levels:

- (1) al-Qa'ida central in Pakistan
- (2) the second tier leadership
- (3) cells (or micro-cells) and individuals

Al-Qa'ida central. Looking first at “al-Qa'ida central,” the key issue is leadership and leadership potential. Although the leadership does not control the worldwide organization in a strict sense, it provides ideological direction and guidance as well as some resources (mainly assistance with training and funding). Bin Laden and Zawahiri possess symbolic value. Locally al-Qa'ida is a disruptive player in Pakistani politics.

The leadership is reduced in number and many key personnel have been captured or killed (although the fate of the targets of drone attacks in Pakistan is not always easy to ascertain). There can be no doubt that their loss is a serious blow to the organization. It is demoralizing as well as debilitating. In addition communication is impeded. Under pressure it is harder to communicate both within the leadership group and to supporters outside, although it is clearly not impossible since al-Qa'ida's media outlet is still operating and video and audiotapes appear regularly.

The key questions on which experts disagree are: can the removed leaders be replaced? How deep is the bench? If there is no effective succession, can the core leadership continue to function under pressure? Can it continue to communicate with the rest of the organization and with the world, which is essential to survival as an agent of jihad? Is the top leadership essential to mounting terrorist attacks against and in the West?

An immediate policy question is whether the al-Qa'ida leadership can survive without a base in Pakistan or Afghanistan. Could it be transplanted to another conflict zone that could provide safe haven, such as Somalia or Yemen? Al-Qa'ida has been rooted in the Afghanistan-Pakistan theatre for almost thirty years. Rebuilding a base in a new location would be problematic, perhaps impossible.

But does al-Qa'ida need a territorial location at all? One reason for needing a base may be to maintain training camps rather than ensure the functioning of the core leadership. Although experts disagree on this issue (and in fact on most al-Qa'ida-related issues), my judgment is that hands on training is important to the tactical success of terrorist attacks. Expertise in handling explosives, tradecraft, and operational security are learned through experience, not the internet or training manuals.

Another critical question is the nature of the relationships between al-Qa'ida central and diverse Taliban factions in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Would we predict alliances or competition? Here again expert opinions differ.

Some analysts predict that if the United States and NATO withdraw, the Taliban will take over in Afghanistan, and al-Qa'ida will return to its pre 9/11 home and pose the same deadly threat as before. Pakistan would be likely to make an accommodation with both the Taliban and al-Qa'ida. The threat to the American homeland would be grave.

Other observers think that there is no coherent "Taliban" but a mix of local interests, that such a weak coalition is not likely to secure control of the country, and that even if a faction of the Taliban did take power (especially the Mullah Omar faction), it would not necessarily be sympathetic to al-Qa'ida and in fact might be hostile. After all, it was al-Qa'ida's recklessness that led to the Taliban's defeat and loss of power in 2001. Some analysts in this camp expect that pragmatic elements of the Taliban would be willing to compromise with the Afghan government.

Another consideration is that al-Qa'ida may not need Afghanistan at all, as long as it can maintain its base in Pakistan. How will American policy choices in Afghanistan affect the Pakistani government's willingness and ability to confront al-Qa'ida? Apparently al-Qa'ida has a closer relationship with the Pakistani Taliban than with the Afghani Taliban, and it is the Pakistani Taliban that has committed spectacular acts of terrorism (perhaps learned from or assisted by al-Qa'ida) and provoked a military offensive from the Pakistani government. Some commentators argue that we should leave the eradication of al-Qa'ida to the Pakistani military and intelligence services. Others think that Pakistan will not do the job, especially considering the high levels of anti-Americanism among the public. In terms of a threat to the homeland, we should recall that the Pakistani Taliban has exhibited a capacity for organizing terrorism outside of the region (e.g., the 2008 Barcelona plot).

The second tier leadership. It is a mistake to conceive of al-Qa'ida as composed of a core leadership at the top and self-generated or self-radicalized volunteers who respond independently to the call for jihad at the bottom. The intermediate level of leadership is equally important to radicalization, recruitment, and the logistics of mounting attacks. Understanding how this structure functions sheds light on the question of whether al-Qa'ida's momentum can be sustained without central guidance from Pakistan or elsewhere.

(1) The first type of interface consists of affiliated or merged local organizations with their own interests in specific conflict zones, such as Lashkar-e-Toiba, Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group, the revived al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula operating in Yemen, or Al Shabab in Somalia. They are either branches of the central organization or associates that have adopted the al-Qa'ida brand or label. In return al-Qa'ida central has acquired transnational reach as well as the all important image of a force that mobilizes Muslims around the world. Some of these alliances seem to be fragile, as local affiliates discover the high price of joining. An important part of the al-Qa'ida brand is suicide attacks on civilian targets, including Muslims. This requirement has apparently provoked dissension in AQIM and in the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group. Nevertheless, a number of attacks and plots in the West can be linked to these groups. They also pose real threats to political stability in Yemen and Somalia.

(2) The second midlevel interface is composed of local leaders in Western countries, often Muslim clerics (e.g., at the Finsbury Park Mosque in London, which drew adherents from across Europe) but including other activists as well. They are public figures, not covert operatives. It is difficult to trace their direct connections to al-Qa'ida central, but clearly they have adopted its principles and beliefs. They provide more than just inspiration by calling for jihad against the West. They also organize young men in summer camps, sports clubs, and other venues for socialization, indoctrination, and recruitment. In the years since 9/11 and particularly since the London bombings in July 2005, Western governments have arrested or deported radical clerics and closed down mosques (or assisted in a transfer of control). Recent reports, however, conclude that imprisoned clerics in Britain have maintained contact with their followers outside and continue to issue fatwas in support of jihad. Similarly, in the United States Sheikh Abdel-Rahman communicated from prison with his followers in Egypt.

Recruits and volunteers. Our concern here is with transnational recruitment in the West rather than recruitment in conflict theatres abroad. Many of the cells in the West, however small, had a leader with connections to higher organizational levels, whether at home or overseas (usually Pakistan in the case of the United Kingdom).

From what little we know, recruitment processes at the individual level vary. Typically it is difficult to establish whether there was a connection between a local militant and al-Qa'ida and to determine who took the initiative in making contact. As seen in the 9/11 conspiracy, the process combines both volunteering and active recruiting by activists or organizers – it is bottom-up and top-down at the same time. This modus operandi has characterized al-Qa'ida from the beginning. The Mohammed Atta group travelled to Pakistan by accident and circumstance, where Khalid Shaikh Mohammed discovered that they were the perfect instruments for his suicide hijacking plan. It still appears to be the case that some individuals in the West initially intend to travel abroad to fight on behalf of Muslims, but when they arrive al-Qa'ida leaders persuade them to return home to attack their own societies.

Key factors in recruitment include family and social ties in the local setting as well as to a country of origin, access to training camps (now primarily in Pakistan), and collective encouragement as well as contacts in institutions such as mosques or even sports centers. Prisons also serve as venues for recruitment (there is no evidence of this in the United States but the European experience suggests that it is common). Social network theory is often used to map out these relationships (usually through friendship and kinship networks). The internet also contributes to radicalization and recruitment, but operational control probably requires face-to-face contact. A recruiter may be in touch with an individual who then reaches out to other individuals to form a conspiracy, or a recruiter may enlist an already-formed group that appears promising. Recruits have included first-generation, second-generation, and even third-generation immigrants as well as converts. Some are citizens, but some are illegal. Some are well-assimilated, well-educated, upwardly mobile, and prosperous, while others are rootless and marginal in a socio-economic sense. Some have criminal backgrounds, some do not. Most participants in these conspiracies are male, and in Western Europe most were initially recruited in their country of residence.

The radicalization process can apparently occur very quickly. Individuals can rapidly move from a secular lifestyle to extreme religiosity and then to the endorsement of violence. It is difficult to predict who will take this path.

The case of Major Hasan and the Fort Hood shootings is a tragic reminder that it is possible for a lone individual to take action unassisted (and that skill with explosives is not necessary). We do not yet know enough to be sure that he acted on his own initiative or what his motivations were, but he was in contact with Anwar al-Aulaqi, a radical cleric formerly preaching at a Northern Virginia mosque, connected to the 9/11 hijackers, and now residing in Yemen. Aulaqi, who is thought to be linked to al-Qa'ida, praised Hasan as a hero after the Fort Hood shootings.

An important public policy question, and yet another point of dispute among experts, is whether or not non-violent Islamist-oriented organizations serve as transmission belts for recruitment into underground cells or instead as safety valves that divert potential extremists away from the path to terrorism. Hizb ut-Tahrir, which seeks the establishment of an Islamic caliphate and is estimated to have a million members worldwide, is a prominent case in point. Western governments have taken different positions on this issue, some banning these organizations and others not (usually on grounds of freedom of speech and association).

Possibly these associations are neither effective substitutes for violence nor conveyor belts because committed extremists are impatient with endless philosophical discussion and eager for action. They are not attracted to moderate Islamism and do not find its representatives persuasive or credible. This rejection is an impediment to a policy that tries to end terrorism by encouraging moderates within the same general community of belief to take a stand against violent extremism. However, it is important to remember that those who use violence are a tiny minority.

What does al-Qa'ida want?

Considering the diversity of perspectives at different levels within the organization, it is not surprising that al-Qa'ida's motivations are not necessarily consistent or uniform. There are many currents of jihadist thought. It is also not surprising that the goals of the top leadership level would be couched in vague terms, reflecting their conception of a minimum common denominator. Little concrete attention has been paid to a positive program for the future, although al-Qa'ida has grand aspirations for the eventual establishment of a caliphate.

Our interest is in those beliefs and objectives that drive attacks on the United States, especially attacks on or within the homeland. What is the rationale now for attacking the United States? Is it likely to be altered as circumstances and American policies change? For example, would there be a shift if American military forces were withdrawn from both Iraq and Afghanistan?

The narrative promoted by the top leadership – reflected in statements by Bin Laden, Zawahiri, al-Suri, and other spokesmen – is that violent jihad is an obligatory response to encroachments on Muslim lands by the “Crusaders and Jews.” Jihad is considered fundamentally defensive and thus essential as long as Islam is in danger. It is also an obligation at the level of the individual,

as authorized by al-Qa'ida. The framing of terrorism as a necessary defense against aggression toward the umma (the Muslim community, not al-Qa'ida itself) and as an individual duty is coupled with another justification. Al-Qa'ida justifies terrorism as a way of making citizens of the West suffer as Muslims have suffered – to establish equivalence or reciprocity by bringing the war home. Communications (audio and video) emphasize the suffering of civilians at the hands of the United States and its allies fighting in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Palestinian victims of Israel are also cited in this context.

These messages constitute powerful and urgent emotional appeals to defend one's community and one's faith and to take revenge on their persecutors. Martyrdom is the highest expression of commitment (and since the war in Iraq it has become an al-Qa'ida trademark, although suicide attacks began in the early 1980s). There is no indication of a change in the view expressed by al-Qa'ida theoretician Abu Mus'ab al-Suri in 2005: the lesson of history is that terrorism is the most useful political method to compel an opponent to surrender to one's will.

Demonstrating that Muslims in the West can be mobilized in the service of these collective aims is a legitimizing device for al-Qa'ida. Sponsoring terrorist attacks in the West is an ideological imperative, essential to the al-Qa'ida identity and image. Promoting terrorism in the West is all the more important to their reputation because challenging the United States in the Middle East has failed (e.g., in Iraq), although Zawahiri boasts that al-Qa'ida has won in every conflict. The al-Qa'ida challenge to Saudi Arabia also collapsed, and Egypt is a lost cause.

Decentralization is also a practical response to pressure. Following the logic that most terrorism is local, instigating local cells to attack the enemy at home is the most effective way of reaching the American homeland. Mounting an attack from abroad is logistically difficult and has not worked well (consider the examples of Richard Reid and subsequently the liquid explosives plot). Al-Suri explicitly acknowledged that dispersion into small units was the most effective way of maintaining the organization and continuing the struggle in face of the effectiveness of post 9/11 counterterrorism.

In asking whether changes in American policy might produce corresponding changes in al-Qa'ida's attitudes, it is instructive to look at al-Qa'ida and sympathizers' reactions to President Obama's speech in Cairo last June calling for a new beginning. Judging by Zawahiri's subsequent speeches and the reactions in online forums and blogs that take the al-Qa'ida line, President Obama's initiative was interpreted as a threat. Zawahiri was scornful of Muslims who were deceived into welcoming a dialogue or partnership with the West. He appealed to nationalism in both Egypt and Pakistan (interestingly, speaking in English to a Pakistani audience and referring frequently to the military). Jihadist circles also seemed to recognize and to be alarmed by Muslims' positive reception of the Obama administration. They are aware of declining public support for terrorism against civilians. One theme of jihadist discourse is that Obama's deceptive sweet-talk and cajoling cannot be permitted to weaken Muslim hatred for the United States. Another theme is that American policy will not change – the new approach renouncing the war on terror is mere rhetoric, and the United States will continue to kill Muslims and to support Israel. An article comparing Presidents Obama and Bush concluded that Muslims should “beware of the cunning Satan, for he is more dangerous than the foolish Satan.” A common view expressed in these discussions is that jihadists *must* act because of the cowardice of leaders in Muslim countries (Egypt and Saudi Arabia in particular), including the ulema or

clergy. Online comments also remind audiences that there has not been a successful attack against a target in the West since 2005. This criticism of their passivity presents a challenge for al-Qa'ida loyalists.

Looking to the future, Al-Qa'ida will attempt to exploit whatever decision the administration makes about Afghanistan. If troop levels are increased to implement the counter-insurgency strategy, al-Qa'ida can point to continued American assaults on innocent Muslims. Civilian casualties are inevitable, no matter how careful and precise American forces try to be. If the United States withdraws, al-Qa'ida will take credit.

Is there Muslim opposition to the al-Qai'da worldview? It is the case that some prominent Muslim clerics have taken a strong stand against al-Qai'da's doctrine (particularly in Saudi Arabia and Egypt). Their critique is unlikely to moderate the views of major al-Qa'ida leaders, who distrust the orthodox clergy as much as they distrust moderate Muslim political leaders. Delegitimizing the jihadist message might discourage potential recruits who have not yet moved to violence, but it is almost impossible to know. It is not as though we can count the numbers at recruiting stations. In addition al-Qa'ida, and the Taliban as well, typically deflect internal criticism of bomb attacks that kill civilians by evoking conspiracy theories: instead they charge that the perpetrators are the CIA, the Mossad, Pakistani intelligence, or other shadowy agents of the enemy.

Conclusion

Al-Qa'ida is declining but still dangerous. It is by no means a mass popular movement but it is a complex, transnational, and multi-layered organization with both clandestine and aboveground elements. It has proved durable and persistent. The determination of its leaders to attack the United States is undiminished and might strengthen as the organization is threatened, but another attack on the scale of 9/11 is unlikely.