

## Statement of Richard A. Clarke

Before the House Armed Services Committee  
27 January 2010

### *The Status of al Qaeda and the US Response*

Mr. Chairman, Members

Had the detonator worked better, it might have happened that last Christmas over two hundred civilians would have been killed in a terrorist attack on American soil. Were that to have occurred, there would have been a round of questions about why al Qaeda was still a threat twelve years after its initial, major attacks against the US. Even though the attack failed, many of those questions have arisen:

--would the first major attack in the US in eight years indicate that al Qaeda had grown to its past strength?

--was there some failure in the policies of the past Administration or this Administration that could be blamed for the continued existence or possible resurgence of al Qaeda?

--why is the United States unable to eradicate this organization which has declared war on us?

It is important that we discuss the status of al Qaeda and our efforts to eliminate it, now when it might be more possible to do so analytically, dispassionately, in a non-partisan manner, than it might be after a successful attack. Therefore, Mr. Chairman, let me suggest seven propositions as a way to answer your two questions about the status of al Qaeda and what we should do about it.

First, if al Qaeda is able to stage an attack on US soil that fact would not, in and of itself, indicate the overall strength of the organization or whether it is in decline or ascent. The December attempt was mounted by one man. The 2001 attacks involved directly only 19 terrorists. It is inherent in the very nature of terrorism that lone operators or small groups of people can inflict significant damage and may harm many people. The extent of the casualties should not be seen as a measure of the support for the terrorists cause or their ability to achieve their stated goals. Nor should an isolated successful attack be seen as indicative of the overall performance by counter-terrorism components of government or the efficacy of our strategy. Indeed, the United States and other modern societies will always be at risk of significant threats from lone operators and will always have to take some level of costly counter-measures.

Second, many of the groups that are often labeled as al Qaeda are long standing national or regional anti-government groups which had previously claimed a religious justification for violence and now have rebranded themselves or have been rebranded

by the media as al Qaeda. There has been an Islamic insurgency for over a century in the southern Philippines, but today it is called al Qaeda-related by some. The organization now calling itself al Qaeda in the Maghreb is the latest manifestation of an insurgency in Algeria going back decades. During the Iraq war, radicals from several countries went to Iraq and formed one of the groups that fought the US military; they chose to call themselves al Qaeda in Mesopotamia. Both Al Qaeda in the Maghreb and al Qaeda in Mesopotamia were unsuccessful, alienating popular support by their goals and tactics. The dramatic series of attacks in Mumbai, seen by some as al Qaeda-related, were carried out by a Pakistani group, Lashkar-e Taiba, which stems from the six decade old Kashmir dispute.

To determine the status of the al Qaeda threat, we should agree upon a definition of the organization. To me it is the organization that first labeled itself al Qaeda beginning around 1990, a collection chiefly of Egyptians and Saudis exiled in Afghanistan (and now in Pakistan) dedicated to attacking what they termed “the far enemy,” the United States. Today, some refer to that group as “al Qaeda Central.”

Third, al Qaeda Central today is less capable as an organization than it was at several points in its 20 year history. It is less capable now than it was when it had a sanctuary in Afghanistan prior to the end of 2001. It is less capable than it was when it had a sanctuary in parts of Pakistan prior to the stepped up US missile strikes and Pakistani army operations in Pakistan in the last year to eighteen months. Nonetheless, al Qaeda Central continues to exist and could still be capable of mounting a significant attack in the US using individuals (including those recruited remotely through the Internet and radical cells in Western countries) or a small number of terrorists.

Fourth, two groups affiliated with al Qaeda Central have significantly increased their ability to threaten the US in the last three years from ungoverned regions. Unlike many of the other so-called affiliated groups, the Taliban and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) appear to have real coordination with al Qaeda Central and share its desire to attack “the far enemy,” the United States. While the Taliban’s focus is to attack the US in Afghanistan, AQAP appears to intend attacks on American facilities in the region and in the United States itself. Both groups have established limited sanctuaries, complete with training facilities, in largely ungoverned areas inside nations (Pakistan and Yemen) whose governments are nominally opposed to al Qaeda. A third group, al Shabaab, a faction in the prolonged civil strife in Somalia, may also be cooperating with al Qaeda Central in planning attacks on the “far enemy.”

Fifth, Arab nations with strong central governments have over the last five years taken significant and successful steps against al Qaeda’s presence and adherents in their nations. Through a combination of improved operations by security services and what amounts to ideological counter-offensives, governments such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Morocco have made their nations inhospitable for al Qaeda. These nations were al Qaeda Central’s “near enemy,” the governments that al Qaeda was formed to overthrow, the nations where it planned to establish itself in control, creating theocracies

called Caliphates. The prospect of al Qaeda succeeding in that goal now seems extremely remote.

Sixth, the response to the threat from al Qaeda, therefore, should be seen as three simultaneous and distinct efforts lasting for many years: a) direct action by US and allied intelligence, law enforcement, and military operations to identify, apprehend, or destroy individual terrorists and cells; b) supporting the ideological counter-offensive by removing irritants and improving relations with Islamic communities, and c) creating effective government in sanctuaries such as areas in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen. In the first two of those efforts, direct action and improvement in relations, the US has had success. Completing the withdrawal of US combat forces from Iraq is an important component on the ideological front.

It will be difficult, costly, and time consuming to establish effective and secure government in Afghanistan, or the ungoverned parts of Yemen and Pakistan. The US cannot achieve those goals alone; it will require the active involvement of the local populations and of US allies, but the US role is the sine qua non. If we do not succeed, then al Qaeda and groups like it will continue, will grow, and will be increasingly capable of directly threatening the United States.

Seventh and finally, all of this means that a significant terrorist attack in the United States remains possible even in the face of overall progress against al Qaeda. When and if that happens, we should not automatically conclude that the attack means that our security services are doing a poor job, that this or the last Administration's policies have made the attack possible, or that we are failing in our overall efforts to counter al Qaeda and similar groups.

We would be well advised to internalize now before another attack these two points: a) eliminating al Qaeda, a stateless ideology, is the work of a generation and b) it is an impossible task to defend successfully every day a nation as large as the United States from attacks that can be carried out by one person or a handful of people.

But it is an impossible task for al Qaeda to achieve its goals. Someday it will be a footnote in history. The more sophisticated and steadfast we are in the many challenging efforts needed to counter threats like al Qaeda, the sooner that day will come.