

TESTIMONY OF
AMBASSADOR DANIEL BENJAMIN
COORDINATOR FOR COUNTERTERRORISM
HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
TERRORISM, UNCONVENTIONAL THREATS AND CAPABILITIES
SUBCOMMITTEE
JANUARY 20, 2010

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Miller, and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this Committee today.

The attempted bombing of Northwest Flight 253, which nearly resulted in the death of several hundred people, was a close call. The President has rightly demanded reviews of and corrections to the key failures that led to the incident—most importantly in the realm of intelligence analysis and watch-listing. Notwithstanding our many successes against al-Qa’ida, the event was a stark reminder that, as the President stated recently, “we face a nimble adversary.”

Indeed, the events of December 25 have shown that at least one al-Qa’ida affiliates – not just the group’s core leadership in Pakistan – has the potential and interest to carry out strikes against the American homeland. We can no longer anticipate that such group’s sole focus will be on the governments in their own countries and regions. As the President said two weeks ago, “just as al-Qa’ida and its allies are constantly evolving and adapting their efforts to strike us, we have to constantly adapt and evolve to defeat them.”

Al-Qa’ida and its affiliates are not omnipotent. As intelligence officials have noted, the group faces unprecedented pressure along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border— thanks to the significant efforts of Pakistani security forces – and continues to suffer significant setbacks and losses. Al-Qa’ida and its affiliates have failed to mobilize large numbers of supporters and in some cases, notably in Iraq, their violent behavior has turned potentially supportive populations against them. That said, their continued ability to attract recruits and technological savvy means they continue to constitute a formidable foe. Al-Qa’ida and its affiliates comprise a system of networks and the relationships between the parts vary over time. What is absolutely certain is that together they continue to represent an enduring and potent threat.

Al-Qa'ida in Afghanistan and Pakistan

The beating heart of the global network remains located in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. The President has made clear that the mission of the United States in Afghanistan and Pakistan is to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qa'ida and prevent its return to both countries. The case for action against al-Qa'ida and its allies has always been clear, but the fog of another war obscured our focus on Afghanistan and Pakistan. Al-Qa'ida is under great pressure in Pakistan and Afghanistan, but the Taliban and other extremist groups continue to provide it with support. Consequently, it remains a capable, dangerous enemy. Should the Taliban succeed in Afghanistan, it would greatly strengthen al-Qa'ida's message that extremists are "winning." The Taliban and other supporting groups must be marginalized if we are to defeat al-Qa'ida.

A key element of our efforts against al-Qa'ida is the significant expansion of our support for Pakistan and its people. Our assistance demonstrates the United States' commitment to addressing problems that affect the everyday lives of Pakistanis. This effort will bring our people closer together and bolster Pakistan against the threat of extremism. A village where girls have the ability to get an education will be more resistant to al-Qa'ida and the Taliban. And a young man with a bright future in a growing economy is less likely to waste his potential in a suicide bombing.

As a result of a long, troubled history, there remains in the minds of some Pakistanis a great deal of mistrust for the United States. Pakistan is a front-line partner in our counterterrorism efforts and we are committed to working with Pakistan to defeat and dismantle al-Qa'ida and counter the violent extremism that threatens both of our countries, as well as Afghanistan. Both nations are heavily invested in this relationship and General McChrystal noted earlier this month that the "trust deficit between Pakistan and the U.S. forces has been shrinking."

Accomplishing our goal of eliminating the al-Qa'ida threat in Afghanistan and Pakistan will not be easy. It requires a legion of tools from military action to communications to delegitimize radical rhetoric, as well as economic and developmental assistance for Afghanistan and Pakistan. We must work with both countries to eliminate al-Qa'ida safehavens, stabilize the region, and develop long-term, sustainable relationships so that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past. The duration of our military presence will be limited, but our civilian commitment must continue even when our troops begin to come home from Afghanistan.

Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula

Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP, claimed credit for the Christmas day bombing attempt. AQAP officially established itself in January 2009 to formalize cooperation between Yemeni and Saudi operatives, but the Arabian Peninsula is not a new front in our war with al-Qa'ida. Indeed, al-Qa'ida has had a presence in Yemen since well before the United States had even identified the group or recognized that it posed a significant threat. In 1992, al-Qa'ida militants attacked a hotel in Aden which was then housing American military personnel who were on their way to Somalia to support the U.N. mission. In the 1990s, a series of major conspiracies were based in Yemen, most of them aimed at Saudi Arabia. Following the attack on the U.S.S. Cole in 2000, the Yemeni government, with support from the U.S., dealt significant blows to al-Qa'ida's presence in Yemen through military operations and arrests of key leaders.

During much of the subsequent period, the Government of Yemen was distracted by other domestic security concerns, and our bilateral cooperation suffered. After the May 2003 al-Qa'ida attacks in Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom dramatically improved its counterterrorism efforts. However, the downside of this good news story is that many of the radicals driven out of Saudi Arabia fled to Yemen, joining other fighters who had returned from Afghanistan and Pakistan. In 2006, a group of senior al-Qa'ida leaders escaped from a Yemeni prison, further strengthening al-Qa'ida's presence in Yemen. This is one of the great challenges of the AQAP threat – the geographical flexibility of al-Qa'ida and its affiliates and their ability to continually exploit poorly or ungoverned territories.

Upon entering office, the Obama administration quickly came to understand that this al-Qa'ida-related activity, as well as poor and deteriorating development indicators – including poverty, illiteracy, and a lack of access to health care – troubling human rights conditions, and a bleak long-term economic outlook, demanded a reappraisal of our Yemen policy. We needed a strategy able to match the complexity and gravity of the challenges facing Yemen.

The U.S. Government review, completed last year, has led to a new, whole-of-government approach to Yemen that seeks to mobilize and coordinate with other international actors. Our new strategy aims to address the root causes of instability, encourage political reconciliation, improve governance, and build the capacity of Yemen's government to exercise its authority, protect and deliver services to its people, and secure its territory.

U.S. strategy toward Yemen is two-pronged: (1) strengthen the Government of Yemen's ability to promote security and minimize the threat from violent extremists within its borders, and (2) mitigate Yemen's economic crisis and deficiencies in government capacity, provision of services, and transparency. As Yemen's security challenges and its social, political, and economic challenges are interrelated and mutually reinforcing, so U.S. policy must be comprehensive and flexible in order to be effective both in the short and long term. In the past year, the administration has maintained a vigorous tempo of senior level visits to Yemen, most recently by General Petraeus and Deputy National Security Advisor Brennan to press our concern about Al-Qaeda's ability to operate from and within Yemen.

This intensified engagement has paid off. To be sure, the Government of Yemen's willingness to take robust measures to confront the serious threat Al-Qaeda poses to the nation's stability has historically been inconsistent. But in the past month, Yemen has conducted multiple operations designed to disrupt AQAP's operational planning and deprive its leadership of safe haven within Yemen's national territory. Yemen has significantly increased the pressure on al-Qa'ida, and has carried out airstrikes and ground operations against senior al-Qa'ida targets. The United States commends Yemen on these successful operations and is committed to continuing support for an effective counterterrorism effort that will include both security and economic development initiatives.

On the security front, we provide training and assistance to Yemen's key counterterrorism units. We provide training to security forces in the Ministry of Interior, including the Yemeni Coast Guard and the Central Security Force's Counterterrorism Unit (CTU). We are also looking to deliver much-needed courses on Border Control Management, Crime Scene Investigation, Fraudulent Document Recognition, Surveillance Detection, Crisis Management and a comprehensive airport security/screening consultation and assessment. We also see additional opportunities now to increase our law enforcement training programs to provide basic police training, increase the capacity of Yemen's criminal justice system, strengthen prison management systems, and bolster civilian customs and border security. In addition, we are working with the Defense Department to utilize other funding sources for counterterrorism assistance to Yemen. With support from Congress, levels of U.S. security assistance and our engagement with our Yemeni partners has increased in recent years. The Departments of State and Defense coordinate closely in planning and implementing assistance programs.

The United States is determined to work bilaterally and with our partners to help Yemen in its efforts to halt and reverse its troubling socio-economic dynamics. Priorities for U.S. assistance include political and fiscal reforms and meaningful attention to legitimate internal grievances; better governance through decentralization, reduced corruption and civil service reform; economic diversification to generate employment and enhance livelihoods, and strengthened natural resource management. The United States also engages directly and positively with the people of Yemen through educational and cultural programs and exchanges. These initiatives contribute to the long-term health of our bilateral relationship and help allay suspicion and misunderstanding. As public understanding of U.S. policy and American values increases in Yemen, extremist and anti-American sentiment wanes.

Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb

Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) continues to menace parts of the Maghreb and the Sahel. In addition to conducting low-level attacks in northeastern and southern Algeria, AQIM elements have repeatedly targeted Westerners for kidnapping-for- ransom in the Sahel, and have killed a number of local military personnel, an American NGO worker and a British hostage.

We are encouraging greater coordination among regional states and with European states, France in particular, to frustrate AQIM's desire to establish itself in Europe. We view the near-term likelihood of such an expansion of operations as less likely than it was just a few years ago. Algeria, a strong partner to the United States in the war on terror, has stepped up operations against AQIM, with notable success. These efforts have put pressure on AQIM, resulting in a shift of activity to the ungoverned areas of northern Mali and Mauritania. In fact, the group faces difficulties in recruiting and increasingly lacks popular support in Algeria. Our regional partners value U.S. and other international assistance to build their capacity to disrupt terrorist attacks, better control their sovereign territory, and counter those who advocate violence. Our long-term approach provides the best opportunity to improve our security and that of our partners from this terrorist threat.

For the foreseeable future, we view AQIM as posing a persistent threat in the Sahel. It will continue to carry out attacks and kidnappings in the area as it is able, but does not threaten the stability of the region in the way that AQAP in the Arabian Peninsula or al-Qa'ida in the FATA do. AQIM has been unable to

conduct large-scale attack since 2008. The group is financially strapped, and the increase in hostage-taking is clearly an attempt to raise revenue. AQIM has failed to establish a viable presence in Morocco, Tunisia, or Libya. Despite an increase in the recruitment of Mauritians, which is troubling, the Muslim populations of the Sahel and the Maghreb generally reject AQIM's extremism.

East Africa al-Qa'ida

East Africa al-Qa'ida (EAAQ) is composed of a handful of experienced operatives—including one of the FBI's most wanted terrorists and those responsible for bombings U.S. Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998. They have maintained a safehaven in Somalia for years, and now have the increasingly vocal support of the foreign terrorist organization, al-Shabaab. Despite some key setbacks, most notably the death of EAAQ leader Saleh Nabhan in late 2009, the presence of these al-Qa'ida operatives in Somalia continues to pose a potential threat to Somali, regional and Western interests.

EAAQ maintains links to al-Shabaab, which has in turn publicly pledged its support for al-Qa'ida and is actively trying to overthrow the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and other moderates in Somalia. Al-Shabaab leaders have publicly threatened to target US and Western interests throughout East Africa. Although they have been unsuccessful in doing so to date, their public rhetoric suggests plotting efforts could be underway. Its forces have killed scores of civilians—including TFG ministers and foreign and Somali aid workers. They have stolen aid and greatly exacerbated Somalia's already dire humanitarian situation, even driving the United Nations World Food Program earlier this month to cease operations in parts of southern Somalia. Al-Shabaab has also managed to recruit an unknown number of foreign fighters—including some Americans.

Our governance and counterterrorism goals in Somalia are clear and they are mutually reinforcing: achieve a stable national government to help ensure that Somalia will no longer be exploited as a base of operations by foreign terrorists; Somalia will not be stable as long as terrorist groups are active there. In addition to humanitarian assistance, the United States has been providing support, primarily through equipment, logistical support, and training, to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and the TFG.

Conclusion

The terrorist threat we face remains a dynamic and evolving threat. I must say that our efforts against al-Qa'ida will be long term in nature. Contemporary terrorism has been decades in the making and it will take many more years to unmake it. In addition to their common extremist ideology, al-Qa'ida and its affiliates share common operational characteristics. They are ruthless and violent. They seek to operate among, reach out to and exploit those with longstanding political, social and economic grievances. They are good at messaging and propaganda and retain enough appeal to fulfill recruitment needs.

The President has confirmed that we must continue to take the fight to al-Qa'ida and its allies wherever they plot and train. Doing that will require the military, intelligence, and law enforcement resources of the U.S. and our allies. We must maintain effective intelligence and operational capabilities to identify and neutralize threats. That includes exploiting opportunities to bring al-Qa'ida's operatives to justice by presenting them before court of law, and robbing them of any claim to martyrdom or public support by revealing them as the vicious criminals they are.

However, defeating al-Qa'ida requires a range of strategies and resources. We need to look to what my colleague Deputy National Security Advisor John Brennan has called the upstream factors. We need to confront the political, social, and economic conditions that our enemies exploit to win over new recruits, funders and those whose tacit support enables the militants to carry forward their plans.

We know that violent extremism flourishes where there is marginalization and perceived –or real– relative deprivation. In recognition of this, my office has set up a unit focused on “Countering Violent Extremism” which will target local communities most prone to radicalization. Such initiatives will allow us to do more to address the underlying conditions for at-risk populations– and improve the ability of moderates to voice their views and strengthen opposition to violence.

The contemporary terrorist threat was decades in the making and it will take many more years to unmake it. But I believe we now have the right framework for our policies, and ultimately, I am confident, this will lead to the decisions and actions that will strengthen security for our nation and the global community.

Thank you again for the invitation to speak before you today, and I look forward to answering your questions.