

The Paradoxes of Al Qaeda
Statement for the House Armed Services Committee
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Chairman Skelton, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify about Al Qaeda's evolving strengths and weaknesses and what implications they might hold for American policy.

Al Qaeda's elasticity and adaptability have long challenged those who seek to define, analyze, contain or defeat the group. Analytically, the first problem is one of taxonomy. Some of the politicized debate about counterterrorism policy in the United States can be traced to persistent confusion about what Al Qaeda actually is, and therefore, what character of threat it presents at a given time. On one end of this foggy spectrum have been a series of maximalist arguments that sometimes equate the Al Qaeda threat with the existential nuclear threats of the Cold War and argue for recognition of a forthcoming, multi-decade conflict between religious civilizations. On the other end of the spectrum are arguments holding that Al Qaeda's dangers have been vastly overstated and that the best way to contain its potential may simply be to ignore its leadership and propaganda until they both wither away. Embedded in these unresolved arguments is an additional confusion about whether Al Qaeda is best understood as a centralized organization; a network of like-minded organizations; or merely an Internet-enabled ideology.

An accurate assessment of Al Qaeda must begin with the recognition that it has become several things at once: An organization, a network, a movement or ideology, and a global brand. Its strengths and weakness across these distinct characteristics vary.

First, although not necessarily foremost, Al Qaeda is a specific organization with a specific history, now more than twenty-one years old, one that has involved the same two leaders – its amir, Osama Bin Laden, and its deputy amir, Ayman Al-Zawahiri – serving without interruption. The notes and principles from its founding meetings in the summer of 1988 are part of the public record. Al Qaeda the organization has never been tested by a succession crisis because its two foundational leaders have remained at large for so long. Its use of leadership or management committees with policy and functional responsibilities such as military operations, finance and media has also been continuous.

Long before 9/11, however, Al Qaeda also deliberately aspired to act as a vanguard and inspirational resource for like-minded violent jihadi organizations across the Islamic world. First in Khartoum, more informally, and later in Afghanistan, more formally, Al Qaeda's leaders attempted to construct common goals and methodologies

for like-minded groups from Southeast Asia to North Africa. The fortunes and connectivity of this intentionally constructed network have continually changed as the fortunes of particular groups have risen or fallen, and as Al Qaeda's ability to operate across international borders grew more constrained after 9/11.

This second aspect of Al Qaeda – its strengths and potential as a network – requires careful, time-bound assessments, grounded in an understanding that the network continually changes shape. A decade ago, Al Qaeda looked particularly strong in Southeast Asia. Five years ago, it looked particularly strong in North Africa and Iraq. Today, it looks weak in both of those regions but stronger in Yemen, Somalia, and of course Pakistan. There is no reason to expect that this current assessment will remain static, not least because U.S. and allied counterterrorism campaigns will continue.

Al Qaeda's function as a central node in its network has also changed over time. Ten years ago its role was primarily to raise money and define and justify the ideology of transnational jihadi violence and to provide training for volunteers who answered its call. Today that media and ideological role remains important, but Al Qaeda's fundraising abilities are pinched. Its most practical contribution to its networked partners today may be the tactical expertise it has developed about bomb making and suicide bomb delivery.

Al Qaeda has also evolved in recent years into a less corporal shape. There are many Islamist organizations with connections to violence that espouse ideas and war-fighting narratives similar to Al Qaeda's, and that distribute and debate those ideas on the internet. And yet Al Qaeda can still claim distinction as an ideology or brand because of its specific critique of the West, its record of spectacular attacks, and the particular call to action it continues to issue through innovative media operations. As the case of the alleged attacker of Flight 253 last year illustrated, Al Qaeda has evolved into an Internet-enabled direct marketing organization in which suicide bombing recruits may never meet leaders of the central organization, and may be recruited in any number of settings (as long as physical contact is possible in order to build sufficient trust).

Al Qaeda's architecture remains both geographical – havens remain necessary for it to attract, train and dispatch attackers – and also virtual, in the sense that the Internet can provide one of the means by which recruits are drawn to the havens. (There is little evidence of Internet-only conspiracies – where this pattern has surfaced, it has been marked by the conspirators' failures.) Al Qaeda's media and internet adoption and adaptation has been one of its hallmarks since the 1990s – it was by email that the future suicide pilots of the 9/11 conspiracy first made their way to Afghanistan. Since then, as digital technology has become much more distributed, varied and sophisticated, this pattern of preaching, volunteerism and recruitment has intensified.

Weaker Politically, Resilient Militarily

This survey of Al Qaeda's multiple forms or categories of expression is important because it helps to explain a paradox of Al Qaeda's persistence as a threat to American

lives, allies and interests. The paradox is that at the same time that Al Qaeda's political and ideological support in the Muslim world has been declining sharply, it has nonetheless been able to remain resilient as a source of disruptive terrorist violence.

Multiple polls have described the decline in public support for Al Qaeda and its tactics in the Islamic world since about 2005. One recent, particularly rigorous poll was published in 2009 by The Program on International Policy Attitudes at the University of Maryland, entitled, "Public Opinion in the Islamic World on Terrorism, Al Qaeda and U.S. Policies."¹ It found that support for Al Qaeda-conceived attacks against American civilians in the U.S. homeland, such as the attack attempted aboard Flight 253, is virtually negligible in a diverse array of heavily populated Muslim-majority countries. In Pakistan, where anti-American feeling has reached a fevered pitch, only nine percent supported such attacks; in Indonesia, the number was five percent. It is common to observe that Bin Laden's poll ratings have fallen precipitously in recent years because Al Qaeda-inspired violence has taken the lives of so many Muslim civilians since 2001. The Maryland poll suggests that citizens of Islamic countries, as elsewhere, overwhelmingly disapprove of all indiscriminate violence against civilians, no matter who carries it out, and no matter what the cause – attitudes that encompass strong disapproval of Al Qaeda's tactics and indiscriminate aerial bombardment by U.S. forces alike.

Al Qaeda has brought its political isolation on itself. Unlike Hezbollah or Muslim Brotherhood-derived movements in the Sunni Muslim world, Al Qaeda has never provided social services to its followers or built an effective political wing. Its leaders have succeeded in speaking to the political grievances of many Muslims, and the issues Al Qaeda leaders have highlighted – the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the presence of U.S. military forces in Muslim countries – still resonate with many of the Muslims surveyed. Yet the outlook of Bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri is not merely political. It is also millenarian, in the sense that both of them believe, as they often repeat, that they have been called by God to lead a war whose outcome is pre-ordained and will only finish at the end of Earthly time. This investment in a narrative that diminishes the significance of contemporary affairs seems to have been one factor in the failure of Al Qaeda's leaders to conceive, pursue and build a contemporary political movement to support what most people regard as terrorism but which they would regard as their guerrilla or military activity. In any event, whatever the explanations, it is now clear that the construction of a political strategy has proven to be beyond their abilities. Al Qaeda's political appeal seems to have crested and barring provocative mistakes by the United States, or allies such as India and Israel, it is hard to see how that appeal can be broadly revived. That is not to say that anti-American Islamist violence is necessarily waning. Even a small, politically isolated group can wreak havoc if it enjoys physical havens and the ability to recruit talented individuals willing to commit suicide in an attack.

Indeed, Al Qaeda remains resilient and dangerous. Its central or original organization and leadership remains in the field. As my colleague Peter Bergen has documented, one transparent measure of the degree of pressure Al Qaeda feels in its homeland along the Afghan-Pakistani border is the number of media releases it has been able to organize. In 2008, its border media operations seemed to come under pressure and

the number of Al Qaeda releases fell by half. In 2009, however, despite the heavy pressure of the American drone attacks and the reported deaths of a number of Al Qaeda commanders, the media operation rebounded. /2 A succession of trans-national plots (many, fortunately, unsuccessful) where evidence clearly implicates support from Al Qaeda technicians or leaders in Pakistan or elsewhere makes clear that the group retains enough breathing space to launch operations that could claim at least several hundred lives in an instance. Careful analysis of the open-source evidence from this string of international conspiracies since the attack on the London subway system in July 2005 suggests that Al Qaeda's ability to organize and fund multi-participant, long-lived, complex terrorist conspiracies such as the one carried out on 9/11 is diminished, although the September 2006 planes bombing conspiracy in Britain offers a reminder that the group's ambitions on this scale have persisted. Flight 253 is a case whose dimensions and character – an attack of limited or no strategic significance, but potentially devastating nonetheless – is consistent with the pattern of Al Qaeda-linked or Al Qaeda-generated plots in recent years.

Regional Affiliates

In a political-military sense, Al Qaeda's greatest potential today probably lies in the violence and ambitions pursued by regional actors in its network. Whether it is correct to call these regional groups Al Qaeda-linked varies from case to case and is in any event difficult to assess confidently from the open source record. What can be said with high confidence is that these groups are often Al Qaeda-related or even Al Qaeda-inspired. I refer here first of all to explicit Al Qaeda "branches" or "franchises" such as the one now based in Yemen and operating on the Arabian peninsula; the remnant franchise in Iraq; or the self-described Al Qaeda units operating sporadically in North Africa. But I also refer to linked or related groups such as Al-Shatab[ck] in Somalia or a complex of India-focused radical groups based in Pakistan, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, which has long-lived historical connections to Al Qaeda.

Currently, from the perspective of U.S. security and global interests, the most dangerous of these regional groups appear to be those in Yemen, but even more so, in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.

The flight 253 plot brought to the fore a pattern of evidence about Al Qaeda's resilience in Yemen that had been accumulating for some time. The group's presence and connections in Yemen's Islamist militias and movements dates back about two decades. More recently, after Saudi Arabia routed out Al Qaeda from the kingdom in the period from 2003 to about 2005, Yemen became a refuge and a regional haven. Its proximity to Somalia has also been a factor. The Yemeni government has often been reluctant to attack Al Qaeda and related groups fully for political reasons and because it has other problems to contend with, such as the emerging Saudi-Iranian proxy war that has been taking place in Yemen's north. When the government has attacked Al Qaeda cells in collaboration with the United States the strikes have not always been effective, and the open source record suggests that much of Al Qaeda's Yemeni leadership remains in tact.

More encouragingly, however, that same record suggests that Al Qaeda's local tribal, geographical and recruitment base in Yemen remains relatively narrow and isolated, confined almost entirely to Abyan and Shabwa provinces.

In the Pakistan-Afghanistan region, Al Qaeda's like-minded allies are far more robust. The number of sworn Al Qaeda members operating along the Afghan-Pakistan border today is probably only a few hundred, according to multiple open source estimates. The Afghan Taliban's fighting force is typically estimated, by comparison, to be in the range of twenty-five thousand. The Pakistani Taliban, some of whose sections seem to be the most closely linked to Al Qaeda, number in the thousands at the least. India-focused groups such as Lashkar, having enjoyed collaborative support from the Pakistani state for so many years, are larger still. Lashkar and other India-focused groups, such as Jaish-e-Mohammed, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, as well as splinters and others, have been able to recruit talented operatives from educated classes and urban centers. Lashkar's ranks include scores of volunteer doctors and other post-graduate professionals. If one of these sub-networks did carry out a spectacular attack, the overwhelming likelihood is that it would be directed against India, which would again raise the specter of disruptive military conflict, undermining U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. The potential of these India-focused groups, with or without clandestine collaboration by Pakistani security forces or A.Q. central, to repeat or exceed the scale of the provocative attack carried out in Mumbai on November 26, 2008, presents, in my judgment, one of the most serious current threats to U.S. interests in the complex of risks and dangers posed by Al Qaeda.

Implications for Policy

In a strategic or global sense, Al Qaeda seems to be in the process of defeating itself. Its political isolation in the Muslim world has set the stage for the United States and allied governments, with persistence, concentrated effort, and perhaps some luck, to finally destroy central Al Qaeda's leadership along the Afghan-Pakistan border. Such an achievement would not only provide justice for the victims of 9/11, it would also contribute to the freedom of maneuver enjoyed by the United States in the region and globally, by drawing to an end the debilitating, destabilizing narrative of hunt-and-escape that has elevated the reputations of Bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri for so long.

More broadly, with or without success in the pursuit of Al Qaeda's leadership, the group's self-isolation should provide a fundamental framework for U.S. counterterrorism policy, particularly in the communications sphere. That policy should be constructed to patiently reinforce Al Qaeda's political isolation. (The hunt for Bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri, by Predator drone and otherwise, may have a countervailing effect in the short run, but the effort to finally destroy Al Qaeda's central leadership is nonetheless essential.) The most effective U.S. approach will be to call attention to Al Qaeda's depredations and weaknesses, through proxies as much as possible, while taking no action itself that might reconnect Al Qaeda to its former political, financial and recruiting support. Fortunately, in strategic communications, Al Qaeda's own actions speak most effectively for themselves – the ghoulish spectacle of a young Nigerian “taught” to

commit suicide by detonating explosives hidden in his underwear was hardly the image of noble war that Al Qaeda would require to recover its lost standing. American communications matter less, but as with Al Qaeda, actions always provide the clearest and most effective signals, particularly in a media era characterized by nearly infinite numbers of channels. Closing Guantanamo, repudiating torture, reaffirming American constitutional values, engaging constructively with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, affirming the sanctity of civilian life in military conflict, are all examples of specific acts by the Obama Administration – attempted or completed – that by themselves can contribute to a successful strategic communications policy aimed at Al Qaeda’s continued political isolation.

In the more kinetic realm, the analysis above argues for a clear-eyed, calibrated forward defense aimed at Al Qaeda’s most resilient military strengths – namely, its surviving leadership and its most potent regional networks. In Yemen, this will require a multi-pronged support to incite and resource efforts by the Yemeni government. Open unilateral action by the United States would be counterproductive because it might broaden the narrow social and tribal base exploited by Al Qaeda in the country.

In the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, the problem of Al Qaeda’s resilience, expressed through the revolutionary ambitions of the Taliban and other radical groups in both countries, provides the context for the Obama Administration’s policy decisions of last fall, which I will not re-analyze here. However, the assessment of Al Qaeda above does point to a potential gap in the Administration’s recently announced Af-Pak policies. To prevail in Afghanistan on the timetable announced by the Administration, the pursuit of cooperation by the Pakistan Army has become a high priority. The Army’s commanders, in turn, have repeatedly resisted urgings that it take aggressive action against Al Qaeda-affiliated groups – not only the Afghan Taliban’s leadership, and sections of the Pakistani Taliban such as the Haqqanni network, but also the India- and Kashmir-focused groups operating on Pakistani soil as well, elements of which were responsible for the Mumbai attack of 2008. (To be sure, the Pakistan Army has legitimate reasons to resist American entreaties for action now. The Army is overstretched, its counterinsurgency capabilities are mixed, if improving, and its capacity to take on multiple internal groups at once is questionable. Yet the Army also has a clear historical record of lacking the will to abandon its policies of using dangerous Islamist militias, including some affiliated with Al Qaeda, as proxies in its regional competition with India.) A risk facing the Obama Administration is that, in its anxiety to avoid aggravating the Pakistan Army and political establishment by making demands about Kashmir- and India-focused groups (at a time when the Administration’s risks and investments are heavily located in Afghanistan) it may leave relatively unmolested the very regional networks that the evidence suggests have the talent, time and space to carry out ambitious violence, whether it is in India or elsewhere.

1/World Public Opinion.org, February 25, 2009

2/Testimony by Peter Bergen, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, TK Date, 2009

3/Forthcoming paper on Al Qaeda in Yemen by Barak Barfi, for the New America Foundation

