House Armed Services Committee
"The State of Al-Qaeda, its Affiliates, and Associated Groups: View from Outside Experts"

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Chairman McKeon, Ranking Member Smith, and esteemed members of the committee, I would like to thank you on behalf of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, known as START, [1] for inviting us to speak with you today. I've been asked to reflect on the "State of al-Qa'ida its Affiliates and Associated Groups." There is, unfortunately, much to say.

Data

In 2012, the most recent year for which START has provided a complete set of global terrorism data to the Department of State for its Congressionally-mandated Country Reports on Terrorism, more than 6,800 terrorist attacks killed more than 11,000 people.[2] Even if you compare these more conservative 2012 figures provided to the Department of State against the more inclusive Global Terrorism Database (GTD) statistics dating back to 1970, the previous record for number of attacks was set in 2011 with more than 5,000 incidents.[3,4] This makes 2012 the most active year of terrorism on record.

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[1] START is supported in part by the Science and Technology Directorate Office of University Programs of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security through a Center of Excellence program based at the University of Maryland. START uses state-of-the-art theories, methods and data from the social and behavioral sciences to improve understanding of the origins, dynamics and social and psychological impacts of terrorism.

[2] It is important to note that incidents had to meet all six inclusion criteria used by START's Global Terrorism Database to be included as a terrorist incident in the Statistical Annex of the Country Reports on Terrorism 2012. However, the Global Terrorism Database itself requires only five of six criteria be satisfied for an event to be included giving the varying definitions of terrorism and to provide flexibility for those who use GTD for different analytical and operational purposes. Specifically, START includes incidents that meet three mandatory criteria and then two of the three following additional criteria:

1. The violent act was aimed at attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal;
2. The violent act included evidence of an intention to coerce, intimidate, or convey some other message to a larger audience (or audiences) other than the immediate victims; and
3. The violent act was outside the precepts of International Humanitarian Law insofar as it targeted non-combatants.

Therefore, the GTD includes a greater number of terrorist incidents than the dataset provided to the Department of State for the Country Reports on Terrorism 2012. If the GTD's inclusion standards are applied to 2012 data, 8,400 terrorist attacks killed more than 15,400 people. By either measure, 2012 is the most active year of terrorism on record.

[3] It is critical to note that beginning with 2012 data collection, START made several important changes to the GTD collection methodology, improving the efficiency and comprehensiveness of the process. As a result of these improvements, a direct comparison between 2011 and 2012 likely overstates the increase in total attacks and fatalities worldwide during this time period. However, analysis of the data indicates that this increase began before the shift in data collection methodology, and important developments in key conflicts around the world suggest that considerable upward trends remain even when accounting for the possibility of methodological artifacts.

Strikingly, it could be argued that the six most lethal groups in 2012 were all part of "al-Qa'ida and its Associated Movement," a phrase used to simplify a very dynamic landscape of violent organizations and individuals. Using data provided to the Department of State, these groups were attributed responsibility for approximately 5,000 fatalities: the Taliban (more than 2,000 fatalities), Boko Haram (more than 1,100 fatalities), al-Qa'ida in Iraq (more than 830 fatalities), Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (more than 500 fatalities), al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (more than 280 fatalities), and al-Shabaab (more than 280 fatalities).[5]

Based on preliminary terrorism incident data for January through June of 2013, and again using the Department of State's inclusion standards, the eight most lethal organizations in that time-period include the Taliban, al-Qa'ida in Iraq, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, Boko Haram, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, al-Nusrah Front, al-Shabaab, and al-Mua'qi'oon Biddam Brigade. These preliminary data reinforce the hypothesis that groups generally associated with al-Qa'ida remain the most lethal groups in the world.

Notably, al-Qa'ida itself was not directly responsible for any attacks in 2012 or the first six months of 2013 for which we have preliminary data. To help interpret these data on terrorist groups, I turned to a START research project funded by the Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Directorate's Office of University Programs, the Big Allied and Dangerous (BAAD) project, led by Victor Asal and Karl Rethemeyer.[6] This project has demonstrated empirically that organizations with greater numbers of alliance

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[4] I am indebted to Erin Miller and the entire Global Terrorism Database team, as well as primary investigators Gary LaFree and Laura Dugan (University of Maryland) for the rigor and objectivity undergirding this terrorism incident data.

[5] Using the more inclusive GTD inclusion standards, these include the Taliban (more than 2,500 fatalities), Boko Haram (more than 1,200 fatalities), al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (more than 960 fatalities), Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (more than 950 fatalities), al-Qa'ida in Iraq (more than 930 fatalities) and al-Shabaab (more than 700 fatalities).

[6] I am indebted to Victor Asal and Karl Rethemeyer, START researchers at the University at Albany – SUNY, who conducted this preliminary analysis and generated the associated graphic for the purpose of this testimony.

connections to other terrorist organizations demonstrate greater lethality on average[7] and are more likely to use or pursue chemical, biological, nuclear, or radiological weapons.[8]

Using preliminary data through 2012 that is currently going through a quality control process, it appears that 12 of the top 20 most lethal organizations have alliance connections to al-Qa'ida and 10 of the top 20 most active organizations (measured by number of terrorist attacks recorded in the GTD) also have alliance connections to al-Qa'ida[9] (see the figure on the next page).[10] While al-Qa'ida did not make the list of the top 20 most lethal or active organizations in 2012, all data suggest it remains a central hub in a network of highly lethal and active terrorist organizations.

Please see the "Network Connections and Lethality" figure on the next page.

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[7] Asal, Victor, and R. Karl Rethemeyer. 2008. "The Nature of the Beast: Terrorist Organizational Characteristics and Organizational Lethality." *Journal of Politics*, 70(2): 437-449.
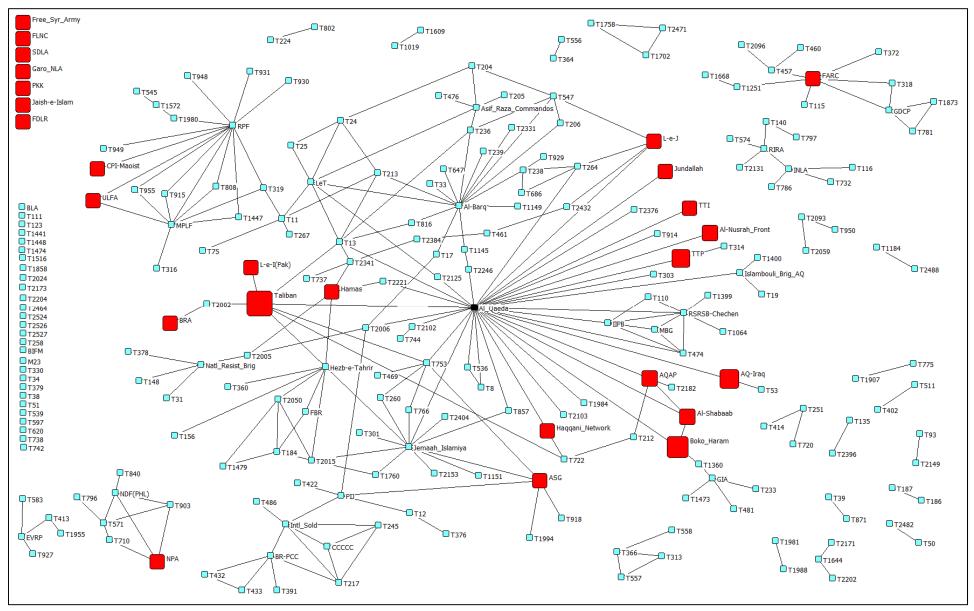
[8] Asal, Victor, Gary Ackerman, and R. Karl Rethemeyer. 2012. Connections Can Be Toxic: Terrorist Organizational Factors and the Pursuit of CBRN Weapons *Studies in Terrorism and Conflict* 35:229–254.

[9] Alliance connections can be categorized according to six types of inter-group connections: "alliance," "suspected alliance," "umbrella," "suspected umbrella," supported cause, and "joint claims for attacks." Alliances or suspected alliances are reports of cooperation of any form. Umbrella relationships or suspected umbrella relationships exist when one organization speaks and/or acts on behalf of other organizations. Supported cause is public rhetorical support for a given organization.

[10] Red nodes represent organizations that were in the top 20 in terms of fatalities, incidents, or both in 2012. Blue nodes connected to other nodes represent all other organizations with a least one alliance or connection in 2012. Isolated blue and red nodes had no alliance connections with other organizations. The larger the node, the more fatalities are attributed to the organization in 2012 by the GTD. This map is only for 2012; it does not reflect past alliance connections or past terrorist activity.

Network Connections and Lethality

Analysis[11]

As a result of the absence of al-Qa'ida Core attacks in 2012 and the first six months of 2013, the al-Qa'ida organization rarely captures media attention except when another important cadre member is killed or captured. Instead, observers now ponder the meaning of the continuous or frequently increasing levels of violence from other violent jihadist groups in the context of a post Arab-Spring world. This is despite the fact that the various narratives of the Arab Spring seemed to undermine al-Qa'ida's reliance on violence and its call to reestablish the caliphate as the governing structure for the Muslim nation. Additionally, individuals continue to join jihadist groups or plot violent attacks of their own volition.

What should we take from the seemingly contradictory developments of a popular rejection of al-Qa'ida on the world stage just a few years ago, and record-setting levels of jihadist violence over the last two years? Did al-Qa'ida succeed by inspiring widespread jihadism, or has it lost to a variety of more popular, parochial actors? To address these questions, it is essential to understand al-Qa'ida's origins and its place in the broader Islamist landscape; only in context can the seeming decline of the al-Qa'ida organization and the persistence of violent jihadism be understood and can governments formulate policy for an expansive threat environment beyond al-Qa'ida Core.

The failure of local jihadist groups to successfully topple corrupt Muslim rulers, the "near enemy," and regionally-oriented irredentist groups to reclaim political control of occupied territory has been a source of frustration since the 1970s. Following Usama bin Ladin's failure to convince the Government of Saudi Arabia to allow his community of jihadist veterans to protect the Arabian Peninsula from Saddam

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[11] Much of this section of testimony is a synthesis of the research and educational efforts of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, and specifically the team of instructors that comprised the Practitioner Education Program.

Hussein's Bathist military, al-Qa'ida formulated the master narrative that would underpin the next 20 years of ideological and operational output as follows:

> The reason that the Royal Family would not allow the *mujahidin* to defend Mecca and Medina from Iraq's advance was the same reason that local and irredentist jihadist groups elsewhere had failed in their parochial contests. The regimes were illegitimate proxies of foreign powers, and behind each of these puppet regimes was the military and economic aid of the "far-enemy." Led by the United States, the far enemy pulled the strings across the Muslim world for their own imperial purposes and to undermine Islam.

Al-Qa'ida's grand strategy would emerge from this diagnosis; al-Qa'ida would enable and repurpose the violence of other militant actors to erode the political, economic, and military will of the United States to remain engaged in the Muslim world. If al-Qa'ida's geographically distributed attrition warfare could sever the ties between what it regarded as the puppet-master and the puppets, revolutionary local and regional jihadist campaigns could reestablish Islamic governance for the Muslim nation, one emirate at a time, until the caliphate could be reestablished.

To realize this grand-strategy, al-Qa'ida positioned itself at the conceptual center of the global jihadist landscape, helping to create the multi-faceted threat that has since manifested in at least four ways.

1. Al-Qa'ida exploited interpersonal and inter-organizational relationships created during the anti-Soviet jihad and inserted itself into extant violent campaigns beginning in the 1990s and continuing until today. It provided martial and ideological training, financing, and propaganda support when it did not also engage directly in violence, as was the case in the Arabian Peninsula in the early 1990s, the mid 2000s, and remains the case today under the aegis of al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and front groups such as Ansar al-Sharia.

The penchant for global jihadist actors to reorient and enable the violence of foreign fighters and segments of existing organizations often creates tensions among the jihadist factions, or between the local populace and the militant actors, as we have seen in Iraq, Somalia and now Syria. As a result, al-Qa'ida rarely succeeds in retaining popular support among the populace over time or reorienting jihadist groups *en toto* to their tactical and targeting preferences. However, they frequently achieve partial successes that amplify al-Qa'ida's operational reach far beyond their organizational safe haven in North Waziristan.

2. Similarly, veterans of the anti-Soviet jihad returned to locally and regionally-oriented groups indoctrinated with a globalized understanding of their respective conflicts. This infusion of global jihadist thought occurred in regions as culturally disparate as Southeast Asia and the Caucasus, where individuals like Ibn al-Khattab helped to retool the ethno nationalist separatist movement in Chechnya as a religious conflict, fostering a spiral of increasingly violent tactics between Russian and Chechen forces during the second Chechen war. Russia would eventually displace the violence in Chechnya to nearby regions including Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkariya, and North Ossetia-Alania, in which a number of terrorist groups also adopted the symbols and spectacular tactics of global jihadism. It was this injection and ultimate embrace of global jihadism over several decades that created the threat facing the upcoming Sochi Olympics.

A recent START background report introduces the threat as follows:[12]

Two suicide bombings in December targeted a train station and trolleybus in Volgograd, Russia, killing at least 34 people and wounding many more. The

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[12] Miller, Erin. 2014. "Background Report: Terrorism and the Olympics: Sochi, Russia 2014." START (January). http://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/STARTBackgroundReport_TerrorisminOlympicsSochiRussia_Jan2014_0.pdf.

attacks, which took place approximately 400 miles from Sochi, highlight the potential threat of terrorist violence at the 2014 Winter Games. The militant group Vilayat Dagestan, part of the Caucasus Emirate, claimed responsibility for the Volgograd attacks. A statement made by the group threatens that if the Winter Olympics are held, the group will carry out additional attacks, particularly targeting tourists in retaliation for "the Muslim blood that is shed every day around the world, be it in Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria, all around the world."[13]

Attacking international tourists at the Olympics and Russian civilians in Volgograd are equated; they are portrayed as two facets of the same fight.

Terrorist Attacks in Southern Russia, 1992 - 2012. Intensity value is a combination of incident fatalities and injuries.

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[13] Heritage, Timothy. 'Militant Islamist video threatens Winter Olympics,' Reuters, January 20, 2014. http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/20/us-russia-olympics-militants-idUSBREA0J0CX20140120.

3. Many of the highly networked veterans of the anti-Soviet jihad encouraged their respective organizations to establish a physical presence in other jihadist fronts as well, capitalizing on the associated ideological legitimacy for recruitment, access to training and battlefield experience, and access to fundraising and equipment pipelines pouring resources into those conflict zones. This phenomenon furthered the globalization of jihadism started during the anti-Soviet jihad.

    For example, Algerian jihadist groups participated in Bosnia and then Iraq, creating the relationships that would eventually lead to the reincarnation of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) as al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).[14] After civil war erupted in Libya in 2011, it was not a departure from historical precedent when al-Qa'ida emir Ayman al-Zawahiri encouraged the AQIM network to syphon resources flowing into Libya for their own violent purposes across North Africa. Neither is it unusual that Mokhtar Belmokhtar, an AQIM commander and veteran of the anti-Soviet jihad, has recently united his AQIM brigade with the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa to create a new jihadist umbrella organization on the heels of French intervention in Mali. This new organization, al-Murabitun, paid homage to al-Qa'ida's emir, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and stated its intent to unite jihadist groups across the Sahel and North Africa as an emirate akin to the storied Muslim empire which controlled *al-Andalus* and fought successfully to delay Europe's *Reconquista* of the Iberian Peninsula.[15]

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[14] Brown, Vahid. 2010. "Al-Qa'ida Central and Local Affiliates." In *Self-Inflicted Wounds: Debates and Divisions within al-Qa'ida and its Periphery,* eds. Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.
[15] Cristiani, Dario. 2013. "Al-Murabitun: North Africa's Jihadists Reach into Hisotry in the Battle against European 'Crusaders.'" *Terrorism Monitor,* 11(19).

4. Finally, al-Qa'ida was forced to invest significant resources into virtual activities following the loss of its training camps in Afghanistan after September 11, 2001, and because of its inability to control the operational and media output of al-Qa'ida in Iraq. While al-Qa'ida's online communication architecture allowed it to interact with a geographically dispersed community and to protect its brand, it also created an environment where countless organizations and individuals could voice competing and complimentary ideas. The virtual landscape quickly became a place where local, regional and global forms of jihadism overlapped for a geographically, ideologically, and strategically diverse audience.

Taken as a whole, the increasingly international and intertwined histories of local, regional and global jihadist actors have at least four salient consequences.

First, and most significantly, the global jihadist cause often benefits from resources mobilized for the purpose of defensive or classical jihad – a concept far easier to justify politically and religiously than the offensive jihad practiced by global jihadists.[16] Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia illustrate this volatile relationship between military occupations or aerial strikes into sovereign territory and violent mobilization. As long as there are local and regional jihadist fronts, global jihadist actors will have access to resources that they can direct against the "far enemy."

Second, the multiplicity of grievances and narratives espoused by local, regional and global actors creates numerous radicalization and mobilization pathways into any one conflict zone. This can facilitate radicalization and the reorientation of individuals such as Najibullah Zazi, who left the United States with his two co-conspirators to join the Taliban and defend Afghanistan against U.S. occupation, but who was identified by al-Qa'ida's external operations cell, trained, and sent back to

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[16] Hegghammer, Thomas. 2008. "Islamist violence and regime stability in Saudi Arabia." *International Affairs*, 84(4).

the United States to plot suicide attacks against the New York City subway system. Zazi was not primed to target American civilians when he entered into this militant ecosystem, but the geographic colocation of local and global jihadist organizations enabled that eventuality.

Third, the harmonization of parochial and cosmic narratives by al-Qa'ida's propaganda organ, and similar propaganda nodes run by affiliated organizations, helps conflate actions on the ground, increasing the chances that Western interests will be targeted in foreign settings. The threat against the Sochi Olympics cited above is a timely example.

Fourth, the propagation of global jihadist ideas through personal contact with jihadist veterans and the propagation of jihadism online help to inspire a new cohort of inspired individuals who are prepared to take action without ever having joined a formal organization, or in some cases, without ever having met, face to face, another like-minded individual. This threat was bolstered by the endorsement of lone-actor jihadism by al-Qa'ida Core and al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula following the Fort Hood attack, and consistently thereafter by English-language media such as Inspire Magazine.

Conclusion

The death of the 21st century's first super-empowered individual, Usama bin Ladin, lead to broad reflection about the viability of his organization and its place in a changing political landscape. Underscoring al-Qa'ida's failure to generate widespread support for both the ends (severing of ties between the West and the Muslim world and reestablishment of the caliphate) and means (attrition by way of violence) of its campaign, early Arab-Spring protestors mostly acted peacefully and

within the parameters of the international system that al-Qa'ida sought to overthrow. Control of the nation-state, not its dissolution, remained the goal of popular protests.

Yet in the wake of this political turmoil, extant violent groups persist, new violent groups have emerged, and global terrorism has reached its modern apex. While many violent groups coalesced around a local agenda without any impetus from the al-Qa'ida organization, al-Qa'ida's long-running propagation of global jihadism and its vilification of the West has influenced these militant organizations to varying degrees. As a result, in contested regions far from al-Qa'ida's geographic center of gravity, violence targeting both local Muslim populations and far-enemy targets persists making the resulting mix of jihadist violence more difficult to disentangle. Moreover, jihadist violence often occurs in places where anti-American sentiment is significant, creating the very real risk that American audiences will conflate the two.

The interplay of local, regional and global actors presents a new political reality that counterterrorism professionals continue to address. This condition will persist to varying degrees even if the al-Qa'ida organization fails to recover from the withering attacks made against it in recent years. While the al-Qa'ida of the 1990s was a corporate entity, albeit a highly networked one, it is no longer always useful to identify where the al-Qa'ida organization ends and others begin.

Sophisticated counterterrorism policy must minimize the effects of global jihadism without inciting local and regional groups to take up its cause, and without allowing al-Qa'ida to erode the nation's political will to remain engaged with the Muslim world. This requires an understanding of the jihadist narrative, the ability to distinguish it from political Islam and anti-American sentiment, as well as an understanding of the specific history that allows al-Qa'ida to enable the violence of others in so many regions of the world.

It would be dangerous to conclude that because the al-Qa'ida organization is not generating violent attacks itself, that the attrition strategy fostered by the organization is also ineffectual. These have been the most lethal two years in the history of modern terrorism, and al-Qa'ida remains at the historical, organizational, and ideological center of the most dangerous terrorist threats of our time.