

UNTANGLING THE TERRORIST WEB:
CATEGORIZATION & PRIORITIZATION
IN THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR

Testimony by Dr. Christopher Swift
Adjunct Professor of National Security Studies
Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service
Georgetown University

Fellow, Center for National Security Law
University of Virginia School of Law



U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Armed Services

February 4, 2014

1. Good morning. Chairman McKeon, Ranking Member Smith, honorable members: this is my first time testifying before the United States Congress, and I am both honored and humbled to appear with these distinguished colleagues. Over the last decade I have conducted field research on al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and associated forces in conflict zones including Afghanistan, the North Caucasus and, most recently, Yemen. My goal this morning is to use the insights derived from this fieldwork to help frame the threats we face and choices we must make. I respectfully request that my remarks be entered into the record.
2. Mr. Chairman, honorable members: Americans greeted the passing of Osama bin Laden with a mixture of pride and relief. After ten years of conflict and countless casualties, many hoped that the loss of al-Qaeda's leader would bring the War on Terror to an end. Initially the signs seemed hopeful. Decimated by drone strikes, bin Laden's successors grew more paranoid, more marginalized, and more isolated from their local allies. Senior al-Qaeda leaders began to disappear. Senior Pentagon officials predicted al-Qaeda's strategic defeat. And as the Arab Spring swept across the Middle East, a growing chorus of pundits and policymakers argued that it was time for America to declare victory and come home.
3. These calls proved premature. As my colleagues explained this morning, a new generation of terrorist and insurgent leaders is emerging from bin Laden's shadow. Some of these groups are survivors, with the remnants of al-Qaeda's Iraqi franchise finding new inspiration in the Syrian Civil War. Others are upstarts, with previously unknown syndicates in Egypt, Libya, and Mali infiltrating and colonizing ungoverned spaces. The result is a constellation of complex, dynamic, and constantly evolving threats—threats that compel us to re-examine our assumptions, recalibrate our strategy, and ultimately revise the legal frameworks authorizing the use of military force.
4. Three questions shape this inquiry. How does al-Qaeda influence local insurgents? How do these insurgents contribute to al-Qaeda's global jihad? And most significantly, how can we distinguish one adversary from the next? Answering these questions is crucial to our shared security. Yet rather than examining these complex relationships in their own right, pundits and policymakers routinely cast disparate groups as part of a common global conspiracy. They confuse radical ideologies with political priorities. And in doing so, they presume that al-Qaeda will inspire, dominate, and control local insurgents.
5. Our experience presents a more complicated picture. Coalition forces in Iraq undermined al-Qaeda by turning tribal leaders against foreign fighters. NATO commanders in Afghanistan actively exploited the personal and political tensions between al-Qaeda and the Taliban. And to the extent that the United States has intervened in the Syrian Civil War, we have done so by identifying and supporting moderate rebel factions. Each of these decisions defies notions of a unitary, undifferentiated threat. Rather than fighting a global war across local theatres, America and its allies instead face a series of regional crises, each with their own unique causes, characteristics, and consequences.

6. We ignore this distinction at our peril. Despite lessons learned in the field, the U.S. Government has no framework for understanding the relationships between transnational terrorists and indigenous insurgents. And for all their emphasis on terrorist “links,” and “networks,” our leaders lack consistent, objective criteria for distinguishing al-Qaeda’s franchises and affiliate forces from other terrorist and insurgent groups. The result is confusion. After a decade of protracted deployments abroad and enhanced surveillance at home, there is no public consensus about who our adversaries are or how they interact.
7. Mr. Chairman, honorable members: these oversights represent the single greatest challenge in the War on Terror today. They hamper our efforts to identify and confront emerging threats. They weaken the consistency and perceived legitimacy of our operations. Most significantly, they undermine our ability to think and act strategically. We cannot align our means and ends until we define the challenges we face.
8. So what categories should we use? In his May 2013 speech at the National Defense University, President Obama explained that the United States is still at war with “Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and their associated forces.” I share that view, as do many members of this Committee. But the term “associated forces” has no legal or strategic meaning. Nor do the terms “affiliate forces,” “co-belligerents,” or “al-Qaeda linked groups.” And when your Senate colleagues asked the Pentagon to define these terms and the threats they represent, they were met with silence.
9. Some of that silence is understandable. Assistant Secretary of Defense Michael Sheehan correctly notes that terrorist threats are “murky,” and “shifting,” and that “it would be difficult for Congress to get involved in the designation of specific al-Qaeda affiliates.” A list-based approach could not account for sudden changes in the character or composition of local terrorist and insurgent groups. It would be clear, but it would also be under-inclusive.
10. Our current approach, by comparison, is over-inclusive. By emphasizing tactics and rhetoric we are collapsing the distinctions between transnational terrorist syndicates and superficially similar patterns of indigenous violence. The more we emphasize the ideologies that bring these groups together, the less we appreciate the local and even parochial interests that drive them apart. The lesson here is simple. If we want to prevail on the battlefield and win the war of ideas, then we must categorize our adversaries and prioritize the threats they pose.
11. Three criteria should guide this process. First, we must distinguish groups with global ambitions from those pursuing more parochial ends. Groups with strong ties to a particular community or territory are less likely to defer to the whims of foreign fighters. Even if they share the same radical ideology, they will ultimately express these ideas through local hostilities. People of all political persuasions think globally and act locally. We should not be surprised when terrorists and insurgents do the same.

12. Second, we must distinguish militant Islamists from Salafi-jihadists. Militant Islamists are revolutionaries. They fight for a social and political order built on religious foundations. Their violence serves a political purpose—even when that purpose is one that we oppose. Salafi-jihadists, by comparison, are nihilists and anarchists. They subvert social and political order to serve twisted notions of religious duty. While these ideologies may seem similar in principal, they are irreconcilable in practice. For militant Islamists, jihad is a means to an end. For Salafi-jihadists, jihad is an end unto itself.
13. Third, we must draw operational distinctions between groups that emulate al-Qaeda, groups that collaborate with al-Qaeda, and groups that subordinate themselves to al-Qaeda’s will. Emulation is mere mimicking. Collaboration creates partnerships. And subordination involves a public merger between a local subsidiary and global parent. These distinctions qualify the operational “links” between local insurgencies and the global jihad. As I explain in my forthcoming book, some groups will form *ad hoc* alliances with al-Qaeda without accepting its authority. Others will embrace al-Qaeda’s message and methods even when there are no meaningful connections between them.
14. The criteria I’m presenting today reveal a spectrum of escalating threats. At the low end we find autonomous rebels that espouse local ideologies and pursue local objectives. Grounded in a discrete community with a clear constituency, they are more likely to resist infiltration by foreign fighters. At the high end we find al-Qaeda’s subordinate franchises—franchises that combine global ambitions with a globalized ideology that glorifies perpetual war.
15. Each syndicate in this spectrum presents its own unique challenges. Some threaten our allies with limited risk to ourselves. Others destabilize vital regions without reaching American soil. And some are reviving al-Qaeda’s global jihad through local insurgencies. Confronting this diversity will require a more nuanced and discriminating strategy. The war has changed, but it is not yet over.
16. More than two centuries ago, the Prussian strategist Karl von Clausewitz warned that leaders “must first establish the kind of war they are embarking, not mistaking it for, nor turning it into, something alien to its true nature.” This is the challenge before us today. We must set priorities based on a clear understanding of our adversaries. We need objective criteria focused on interests, ideologies, and operations rather than subjective speculation that seeks to build al-Qaeda up, or define the threat down. In short, we need to see the world as it is, not as we want it to be.
17. Mr. Chairman, honorable members: I believe that every President needs the discretion to identify and interdict terrorist threats in the field. But Congress also plays an essential role by establishing the legal and strategic framework for the use of force. With all the challenges and controversies confronting the armed services today, this framework desperately needs your attention. Thank you. I look forward to your questions.