

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

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Chairman Thornberry, Ranking Member Langevin, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee: thank you for the opportunity to speak about how we, at the Department of Defense, are addressing today's emerging counterterrorism threats.

While the past decade has been marked by two major wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we have not lost sight of the more pervasive and immediate threat of terrorism, especially from al-Qa'ida and its affiliate networks. To combat this widespread and evolving threat, we have engaged with willing nations around the world, building their capabilities and strengthening our partnerships with them. We have also leveraged a whole-of-government approach, characterized by diplomatic, economic, intelligence, law enforcement, informational, financial, and military instruments. In doing so, and with support from many of you in this room today, we have protected the American people.

In January 2012, the President and the Secretary of Defense released new defense strategic guidance, which emphasized the need to rebalance towards Asia/Pacific, while retaining our focus on counterterrorism and irregular warfare capabilities. Specifically, it stated that "our [CT] efforts will become more widely distributed and will be characterized by a mix of direct action and security force assistance," and that we will "continue to build and sustain tailored capabilities appropriate for [CT] and irregular warfare."

Today I wish to expand upon our defense strategy and discuss how—in the context of the dynamic threat posed by al-Qa'ida and other terrorist groups—our CT efforts are progressing. I will also speak to the role of U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) in the context of this new defense strategy.

Only one year into the strategy, we are already witnessing its impact, particularly in Somalia and Yemen. For example, in Yemen we've taken key leaders off the battlefield and Yemeni security forces have pushed them out of safe havens in the South. We are not about to claim victory; however, we have made significant progress in achieving our objectives and greatly diminishing the al-Qaida network's ability to recruit, train and launch effective attacks in the twelve years since 9/11.

I'd like to talk first about the persistent and evolving threat from al-Qa'ida and its affiliates.

The Threat

Al-Qa'ida is significantly diminished in some theaters but still a persistent threat. Core al-Qa'ida's leaders are still based in the mountainous region between Afghanistan and Pakistan. As we wind down U.S. combat operations in Afghanistan, we cannot lose focus on this area. But al-

Qai'da and its affiliates are also evolving to exploit opportunities and fragile environments in Africa and the Middle East brought on by the unrest there over the last several years.

Outside the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, Yemen has been a safe haven for al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Yemen remains a place where terrorists aspire to attack the United States and our allies, and AQAP is bent on using violence to disrupt the ongoing political transition there.

In the Horn of Africa, al-Qa'ida commenced its global terrorist campaigns with attacks against U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998. Today East Africa-based al-Qa'ida associates are closely intertwined with al-Shabaab, which itself aspires to establish a Taliban-like Islamic State and launch regional and transnational terrorist attacks. Most of the key East Africa-based al-Qa'ida and al-Shabaab leaders have been removed from the battlefield. Despite the incredible progress in Somalia over the past few years, including the establishment of the first elected government in decades, some remnants of al-Qa'ida remain and are seeking to regroup.

Meanwhile, outside of their traditional strongholds, al-Qa'ida and other extremist organizations are adapting and regenerating in ungoverned or poorly governed spaces, carving out new sanctuaries, and threatening our overseas interests and those of our regional partners. In particular, they are taking advantage of the instability and turmoil resulting from the Arab Awakening, in places like Syria and Libya. We saw the dangers manifest through this combination of extremism and weak governance at our diplomatic facilities in Benghazi, where we lost an Ambassador and three other Americans; in Algeria, during the attack by a Mali-based terrorist group on the British Petroleum facility at In Amenas; in Nigeria, where al-Qa'ida affiliates have kidnapped and executed western hostages and bombed the UN Headquarters in Abuja; and in northern Mali, where al-Qa'ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its allies were expanding their control over some population centers until the French and regional partner forces – many of them trained and supported by the United States – intervened to counter the terrorists and reverse their momentum.

In North and West Africa, AQIM is exploiting volatility in the region and a lack of state control over significant swaths of territory to establish new operating environments. Weapons from Libya and money from kidnappings and illicit trafficking are enabling al-Qa'ida activity that stretches from the Mediterranean to Mali and down to Nigeria. We rely on an indirect approach in the region, building the capacity of partner states to counter shared threats. Limited government capacity and frequent political instability – such as coups d'états – pose challenges to our efforts. But such challenges make a regional approach even more critical and are why we are working with a wide range of partners, including the United Nations and regional security organizations, to counter these threats.

In Syria, during an almost two year-long violent uprising to depose President Assad, al-Qa'ida in Iraq's (AQI) network in Syria—operating under the moniker al-Nusra Front—has sought to portray itself as part of the legitimate Syrian opposition. Al-Nusra Front is, in fact, an attempt by AQI to hijack the struggles of the Syrian people for its own malign purposes—attempting to establish an al-Qa'ida-governed state in the region.

The threat is also metastasizing. New groups, many with links to al-Qa'ida, are beginning to develop, such as Ahrar al Sham in Syria, Muhammad Jamal Group in Egypt, Ansar al Sharia in Libya and Tunisia, Tawhid Wal Jihad in West Africa in Mali, as well as Boko Haram in Nigeria. Although many of their operatives are focused on local targets and goals, many of these organizations have external operations agendas and can be expected to turn to international targeting if left unopposed. In some cases, as groups become entrenched, they begin to establish more sophisticated training camps. Although these camps do not match the scale witnessed in pre-9/11 Afghanistan, they are specialized, mobile, and attractive to new recruits. Some of these camps provide advanced explosive training and tradecraft, radicalize personnel, and are a means to provide funding and weapons, which when combined, enables them to become a strategic threat. It is also critical to enable effective local capacity before the threats grow too large for local security forces to manage.

We have learned from experiences in Libya and Algeria that these groups will take advantage of U.S. engagement and interests in fragile and conflict-affected areas to target our citizens. These opportunistic attacks can be challenging to predict and costly when executed. As we saw in the case of Algeria, these groups could target industrial or humanitarian compounds and threaten U.S. personnel and interests. This has reinforced our need to strengthen our relationships with regional partners to advance our common security objectives.

Development of persistent relationships with capable units in host nations is critical so that we can ensure agile and capable responses to a range of contingencies. SOF and other forces focused on security force assistance are skilled at taking country-specific approaches and seeking opportunities to establish critical operational and intelligence relationships needed to (1) maintain constant pressure on al-Qa'ida-affiliated groups and (2) ultimately defeat them. As we examine indicators and trends shaping our future security environment, regional specialization and the ability to operate independently in austere and denied areas will enable enhanced security for U.S. overseas personnel, facilities, and interests.

Elements of a Counterterrorism Strategy

We cannot allow al-Qa'ida to benefit from sanctuary with impunity, as they did in Afghanistan during the 1990s. To attack al-Qa'ida and diminish its influence, we must continue to employ a unique range of tools and activities. Along those lines and as mentioned earlier, the New

Defense Strategy describes the requirement for a mix of direct action and security force assistance.

Direct Action

The high-profile success stories of the last decade have often resulted from direct action precision strikes and raids, which have disrupted some attack plans and degraded elements of al-Qa'ida. But we cannot rely solely on precision strikes to defeat enemy networks and foster stability – these operations buy us time but do not provide a lasting solution. Ultimately, the decisive battle to defeat these groups must be fought—and won—“by, with and through” host nation efforts.

We must now transition to a period with partners in the lead but we will always reserve the right to defend ourselves. For this reason, we must retain high end capabilities to deploy and strike swiftly and precisely anywhere in the world.

Security Force Assistance

The effort to build the capabilities of partner nations' special operations forces can serve two purposes: (1) to deny space and sanctuary and (2) to develop partner capability to conduct specialized missions, including direct action against key terrorist group leaders but also elite capabilities to respond to a range of contingencies and threats as they emerge.

Helping our foreign partners to provide for their own security and contribute to regional stability is an investment that pays immediate and long-term dividends by reducing the need for costlier U.S. interventions in response to turmoil in regions critical to U.S. interests. These activities are a cost-effective way to strengthen our national security posture by building lasting relationships and alliances with partner nations. Efforts to build partners' capacity to conduct their own operations against terrorist threats are a fundamental aspect of our strategy. Capable partners mitigate the burden on U.S. forces and serve as the basis for future cooperation, improved U.S. access, and combined operations.

Security Force Assistance is often conducted by our special operations forces, whose history and proficiency at working “by, with, and through” partner forces makes them our provider of choice for this mission. SOF operate through persistent engagement in key countries, which generates “operational context.” Operational context is the thorough understanding and, in fact, expertise that is uniquely gained through multiple visits to the same areas. This includes understanding local culture, society, language, economy, history and politics. In short, SOF operators have valuable insights on the physical and human terrain of their areas, which allow them to be more precise and therefore successful in their enabling activities.

Beyond Afghanistan, SOF have been deployed to dozens of countries across the globe, conducting low-visibility, highly-sensitive missions that are putting pressure on and constraining the ability of the al-Qaida network to plan, train, and prepare for terrorist attacks.

There is nothing new about this mission, for the United States or for our SOF. Prior to 9/11, U.S. SOF were working around the world to train, equip, advise, and assist host nation forces to combat threats to security and U.S. interests.

For example, in Colombia, U.S. Army Special Forces trained and assisted host-nation forces to combat the drug smuggling and violence instigated by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). The successful rescue of three U.S. hostages in 2009 marked the culmination of two decades of persistent SOF efforts to build Colombian SOF capabilities. Now, we are encouraged to see that Colombia is in turn providing justice sector and security force assistance of their own to other U.S. partner nations across the Americas and in Africa.

More recently, SOF have played a key role in places like the Philippines, where their decade-long engagement has yielded more capable partner forces that have made significant progress countering terrorism. The ongoing relationship between SOF and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) strengthened when SOF deployed in 2002 to act in a non-combat role to advise and assist the AFP in operations against the Abu Sayyaf Group, a terrorist entity taking advantage of safe havens in the southern Philippines. The units first engaged with local residents to learn their basic needs. This allowed U.S. SOF to then work with the AFP to address grievances in the community, severing their ties with the terrorist groups. As SOF trained and advised the AFP personnel, they helped coordinate security efforts and interagency---sometimes international---programs to address key issues such as water, medical care, transportation, and education.

Currently, our CT cooperation with the Yemenis has placed unprecedented pressure on AQAP, and we continue to support the development of Yemeni capacity to conduct intelligence-driven CT operations in a manner that respects human rights and makes every effort to avoid civilian casualties.

In North and West Africa, we are providing support to the French in their efforts to degrade the capacity of AQIM. We have moved assets and provided intelligence to enable the French to effectively prevent AQIM, its off-shoots, and allied insurgents from advancing farther south into Mali. These efforts illustrate that partners in the lead can include key allies, like France, as well as host nations such as Niger and Chad.

In Somalia, the U.S. works through the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). We have provided advising and assistance to AMISOM which has reduced al Shabaab's freedom of movement in south and central Somalia

In order to conduct these security force assistance activities, SOF must leverage a wide variety of authorities available to the Geographic Combatant Commands (GCCs). While many of these authorities contain valuable elements that enable our SOF to build capacities in key areas, we still face a pervasive management challenge matching various authorities and timelines in order to accomplish key missions can be burdensome even when individual programs are executed efficiently. Further, no authority exists that is specifically tailored to allow our SOF to rapidly engage where necessary in order to build critical SOF capabilities during windows of opportunity that might be fleeting.

Current Special Operations Efforts

Since 9/11, a key mission of SOF and U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) has focused on combating terrorism around the world, and that CT fight will not abate anytime soon. SOF will continue to work actively to deter, disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qa'ida and its associated forces and affiliates.

Section 1208, a valuable authority that allows us to enable and leverage willing partners to support USSOF operations to combat terrorism, has produced significant and tangible operational effects that greatly impact our efforts to defeat al-Qa'ida. In today's amorphous global threat environment, it is more important than ever that the GCCs have this critical tool to rely on the access and placement that our forces cannot attain unilaterally.

The need for persistent engagement around the globe and growth of mission requirements have resulted in an unprecedented growth in Special Operations Forces— in fact, the largest expansion of SOF personnel, force structure, budget and enablers since Vietnam.

This expansion will help support Admiral McRaven's vision of a global SOF network. This informal, global network of international Special Operations Forces will allow us to rapidly and persistently address regional contingencies and threats to our stability. This type of persistent engagement will develop trust, a common operating picture, and future cooperation operations against mutual threats. To develop this concept, we are excited to see the development and success of the supporting Theatre Special Operations Commands. These commands are present at each Geographic Combatant Command and help manage the SOF elements in that area of responsibility. As we expand these TSOCs, we hope to better integrate SOF efforts across the areas of responsibility to ensure plans and strategy development as well as their expertise are available to the Geographic Combatant Command

I'd like to emphasize that our successes have come at a cost. The continuous deployments over the past decade have placed extraordinary operational requirements on Special Operators. For example, 85% of the force has been engaged as front line warriors in Iraq and Afghanistan, and since 2001, we should not forget that more than 400 Special Operators have been killed and over 3,000 have been injured.

Future of Counterterrorism and SOF

Relative to the aforementioned, new defense strategy, the Department of Defense will take a strategic approach to security cooperation and ensure we have comprehensive and integrated capabilities in key regions in order to confront critical security challenges.

Over the past decade, much of the strategic emphasis in security cooperation has rightly focused on supporting current operations and helping states address internal instability. As we draw down from a decade of large-scale conflict, we will place additional strategic emphasis on preparing our network of allies and partners to confront the evolving threat of al-Qa'ida and its affiliates.

To do this, we require security cooperation tools that are calibrated to optimally prepare the United States optimally to exploit emerging opportunities and counter potential threats— this means lowering the barriers to defense cooperation and being prepared to leverage opportunities rapidly with like-minded partners. To better combat al-Qa'ida, Congress has granted temporary authorities to the Department of Defense. Tools such as the Section 1206 Global Train and Equip Program—an indispensable and proven authority; Section 1203 Support to Yemen and East Africa; Section 1208 Support of Military Operations by U.S. SOF to Combat Terrorism Program; and the Combating Terrorism Fellowship Program are indispensable to maintain constant pressure on al-Qa'ida and its affiliates worldwide. We will also continue to work closely with the State Department and other departments and agencies to ensure that the Department of Defense's efforts are agile in responding to partners' needs while being implemented with effective oversight in a manner that reinforces overarching U.S. foreign policy goals.

As we evolve to respond to the new set of demands, we cannot afford to lose sight of what makes our force truly great – the SOF Operator. Here we must stick to our principles – namely the first SOF truth -- that “Humans are more important than hardware.” There are two key attributes of the future SOF operator that will need to be sharpened: (1) regional specialization and (2) the ability to operate independently in austere environments. Our best hedge against an uncertain future is a well-educated and highly trained special operator.

SOF were designed to conduct operations in hostile, denied or politically sensitive areas to achieve national objectives by unconventional means. Executing the new strategy will demand the same level of regional acumen that SOF has always pursued. To meet Combatant Commander requirements for foreign internal defense, security sector assistance and unconventional warfare, SOF will need to continue sharpening their proficiency in language and regional expertise so they are conversant with the cultural and military history of regions where they will be deploying.

Probably the single greatest thing we could do to prepare our SOF for the expanded mission set of the future operating environment is to manage SOF talent properly and in a way that incentivizes the “indirect action” career path for the SOF operator. There is a range of ways through which to accomplish this goal. A critical component of our effort to implement the new strategy will be working with USSOCOM to develop appropriate Force Management practices to develop the SOF cadre needed in the future.

Equally important is our need to care for the SOF operator. This includes providing tailored services for post-deployment that consider the unique stresses a career in SOF places on one’s family. Admiral McRaven has taken strong steps towards these objectives, and I fully support his initiatives.

CONCLUSION

I am confident that SOF will provide our national policy leaders a steady and established option to engage – consistent with our national and defense strategies-- with a low footprint and a focus on enabling our partners.

Supporting and relying on these partner nation forces come with risk. I wish to close by discussing the difficult trade-offs that we, as policy makers, will face in the next decade.

The most evident risk is to the safety of our personnel. SOF are operating in dangerous locations against ruthless enemies where death or injury are real possibilities. We also risk being drawn into broader fights beyond our narrow CT objectives. I note: It is often difficult to draw the line between our CT objectives and regional, ethnic or sectarian fights wherein we have limited or no interest in becoming involved. And there is always the risk of the proverbial “slippery slope” –a gradual increasing of U.S. commitment that outpaces our national interest. There is no easy answer and no easy formula for deciding where and at what level to engage. There are sometimes risks to not doing enough to support a fledgling state, confronted by robust international terrorist groups with access to external financing, weapons and fighters. We risk allowing terrorist threats to fester and grow until they directly threaten us.

We also risk association with poorly trained and undisciplined partners. Some have weak legal systems and demonstrate a poor history of respect for the rule of law. And these partners may make mistakes – or operate in ways that we would not fully approve – which may tarnish our image, challenge our value sets, and – in some cases – force us to disengage. But these are the areas in which our SOF are required to work—not in countries with strong and mature defense establishments. Our challenge is two-fold: (1) to provide the capabilities to meet military challenges and (2) to do so in a way that respects the rule of law and legitimate governments. Our SOF can and will pursue U.S. national interests in a collaborative way with key partners, helping to counter the evolving al-Qa’ida threat.

The Department of Defense is committed to working to build our SOF to be the best, most effective force we have and to countering emerging threats to the United States and its interests. As the United States faces an ever-more dynamic security environment and adaptive threats, such as global terrorism, we must develop and support our SOF community so that our next decade is even more effective than the last.

Chairman Thornberry, Ranking Member Langevin, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you and testify on the Department’s perspective on emerging counterterrorism threats. This concludes my statement.