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Former United States Senator  
House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
“Is al-Qaeda Winning? Grading the Administration’s Counterterrorism Policy”

April 8, 2014

Thank you, Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Sherman, distinguished Members of this Committee. I am grateful to appear before you today.

Let me begin by commending you for holding this hearing. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the overwhelming focus of our government was on the threat of terrorism and in particular al Qaeda. Today, that is no longer the case. This is in large part a consequence of the success we have achieved—namely, the fact that we have not had another catastrophic attack on our homeland on the scale of that terrible September morning.

This success, however, is not because of an absence of terrorist plots against us. Rather, it has been achieved through the vigilance, determination, courage, and creativity of national security professionals and elected leaders across two Administrations, as well as the close cooperation and help of America’s allies and partners around the world.

Pride in this achievement, however, must be tempered by an awareness of several realities. First, al Qaeda and its affiliates remain a ruthless, determined, and above all *adaptive* adversary. Just as importantly, the underlying ideology that inspires and drives al Qaeda to attack us and our allies—the ideology of violent Islamist extremism—is neither defeated nor exhausted.

For these reasons, our safety as a nation is inseparable from our own ability to adapt to meet an evolving threat. It also requires that we stay engaged in the world beyond our borders.

Yet increasingly we hear voices—on both sides of the political spectrum—who say that the threat from terrorism is receding, or that it was overblown in the first place, and that the end of this conflict is near.

With respect, I believe these arguments are badly mistaken.

There is no question, the United States—beginning under President Bush and accelerating under President Obama—has inflicted severe damage to ‘core’ al Qaeda, the senior leadership that reconstituted itself in the mid-2000s in the tribal areas of northwestern Pakistan, after being driven from neighboring Afghanistan.

To borrow a phrase used by David Petraeus, the progress we have achieved against core al Qaeda is real and significant. But it is also *fragile* and *reversible*.

What has degraded core al Qaeda in the tribal areas of Pakistan has been the persistent, targeted application of military force against these individuals and networks. The precondition for these operations, and the intelligence that enables them, has been our presence in Afghanistan. If the United States withdraws all of our military forces from Afghanistan at the end of this year—the so-called “zero

option,” as some now advocate—you can be assured that al Qaeda will regenerate, eventually on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border.

If you doubt this, I urge you to look at what is happening in western Iraq, where just a few years ago, during the U.S.-led surge, al Qaeda was dealt an even more crippling blow than core al Qaeda has suffered in Pakistan today. Yet al Qaeda is surging back in Iraq, hoisting its black flag over cities like Fallujah, murdering hundreds of innocent Iraqis this year, pushing violence back to 2007 levels.

This leads to my next point. While space for core al Qaeda in tribal Pakistan has been reduced thanks to persistent U.S. pressure in recent years, territory where al Qaeda affiliates can find sanctuary has grown elsewhere during this same period, including in the Middle East, North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Al Qaeda and other Islamist extremist groups have long exploited Muslim-majority countries weakened or fragmented by conflict, and neglected by the international community. They take advantage of these places to recruit, radicalize, and train the next generation of extremist foot soldiers. They use them to plot and plan attacks.

That is why al Qaeda and its affiliates first went to Afghanistan in the 1990s. That is why they later turned to Yemen and Somalia in the 2000s. And it is why they are fighting to build sanctuaries in Syria, Libya, and Iraq today.

Several factors make the prospect of al Qaeda sanctuaries in these three countries especially dangerous. The first is their respective locations. Syria and Iraq are the heart of the Arab Middle East, bordering key American allies like Israel, Jordan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. Libya and Syria are Mediterranean states—comparatively easy to reach from the West, in contrast to remote Afghanistan and Pakistan. And Libya is also adjacent to the vast Sahel, with its weak and poorly governed states.

Equally worrisome, these are all places where U.S. policymakers have signaled that involvement of the U.S. military is for all intents and purposes off the table, or at least severely constrained. This means that the United States is not able to combat the rise of al Qaeda in these countries effectively.

Of the three countries, the situation in Syria is by far the most alarming; the failure of U.S. policy by far the most profound; and its implications for our national security by far the most severe.

According to one estimate, there are today more foreign fighters in Syria than in Iraq and Afghanistan combined over the past ten years.

The Director of National Intelligence recently described Syria as—and I quote—“an apocalyptic disaster.” And the Secretary of Homeland Security recently warned that Syria has become—and again I quote—“a matter of homeland security,” as extremists there “are actively trying to recruit Westerners, indoctrinate them, and see them return to their home countries with an extremist mission.”

Put very bluntly, Syria has become the most dangerous terrorist sanctuary in the world today—and the United States has no coherent or credible policy for dealing with it. Nor is there any apparent strategy in place to address al Qaeda’s growth in Iraq or Libya.

Let me be very clear. No one is advocating sending tens of thousands of troops to these countries. Nor is it within our power, or our responsibility, to solve every problem these countries face.

But there is much we could be doing that we are not.

In Afghanistan, we can choose not to squander the gains of the past decade and instead keep a sufficient follow-on military presence to sustain the increasingly capable Afghan National Security Forces in our shared fight against al Qaeda and the Taliban.

In Libya, we can put in place a large-scale, well-resourced, U.S.-led effort to build up new Libyan army and security forces as quickly as possible—rather than the disorganized, poorly-resourced effort now in place.

In Iraq, we can make clear we are willing to support Iraqis against al Qaeda with U.S. airpower, as well as a presence of a small number of embedded advisors on the ground, while using that increased assistance as leverage to encourage political reconciliation.

And in Syria, we can much more aggressively, robustly, and creatively provide militarily-relevant support to non-extremist rebel forces, who are fighting our two most dangerous enemies in the world there—al Qaeda and Iran. We should also, in my view, reopen the debate about the limited use of American airpower—to degrade Bashar al-Assad's ability to terrorize civilians through indiscriminate aerial bombardment, and to target the transnational jihadists that the moderate opposition is fighting.

None of these actions represent simple or quick solutions. There are no easy solutions for al Qaeda. But there are smart, measured steps we can take that will put us in a stronger position to deal with the evolving threats we face and that will ultimately make us safer as a country.

It is also worth noting that, in all of these countries, we have repeatedly seen that al Qaeda and its extremist vision are rejected by the overwhelming majority of people living there. In Iraq, Syria, and Libya, we have seen popular, grassroots movements rise up against al Qaeda and other extremist groups. The question is whether we provide these anti-extremist movements with the help and support they need, or abandon them.

Before closing, let me make one final point. Ultimate success in this struggle depends not simply on the death of particular terrorist leaders or the destruction of terrorist groups, important though that is. Rather, it requires the discrediting of violent Islamist extremism as a worldview.

And let me underscore here, the enemy is violent Islamist extremism—a political ideology that seeks to justify totalitarian political system by perverting a great world religion. The enemy, we can never stress enough, is *not* Islam itself.

Nor, I would add, is it political Islam per se. In fact, there are Islamists who are neither violent nor extremist, and who recognize al Qaeda to be a mortal threat just as much if not more than we do. In Tunisia, for instance, we see an Islamist party that has proven thus far to be respectful of democracy and of political pluralism.

For this reason, the U.S. does have a core national interest in the political development of the Middle East towards greater freedom. Human rights and democracy are not periphery considerations in the fight against al Qaeda; in the long run, they are vital to its defeat.

Mr. Chairman, the progress we have made against al Qaeda is real. But we should not delude ourselves into thinking that this fight is anywhere near over. Perhaps the best description of where we find ourselves can be found in the words of a great statesman of the last century, speaking of a very different struggle against a similarly totalitarian foe.

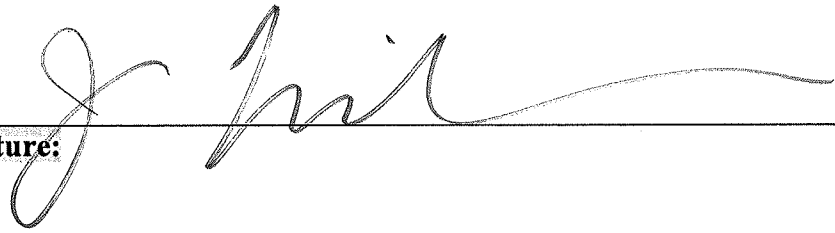
Speaking in late 1942, after the first British victories in North Africa, Winston Churchill told the House of Commons: "Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

So, too, perhaps it is for us now "the end of the beginning" in our struggle with al Qaeda. If so, that is reason to hope—but also to recognize that much danger and difficulty still lies ahead.

United States House of Representatives  
Committee on Foreign Affairs

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Clause 2(g) of rule XI of the Rules of the House of Representatives and the Rules of the Committee require the disclosure of the following information. A copy of this form should be attached to your written testimony and will be made publicly available in electronic format, per House Rules.

<b>1. Name:</b> Joseph I. Lieberman	<b>2. Organization or organizations you are representing:</b> Former United States Senator Joseph I. Lieberman
<b>3. Date of Committee hearing:</b> April 8, 2014	
<b>4. Have you received any Federal grants or contracts (including any subgrants and subcontracts) since October 1, 2008 related to the subject on which you have been invited to testify?</b>  <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No	<b>5. Have any of the organizations you are representing received any Federal grants or contracts (including any subgrants and subcontracts) since October 1, 2008 related to the subject on which you have been invited to testify?</b>  <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
<b>6. If you answered yes to either item 4 or 5, please list the source and amount of each grant or contract, and indicate whether the recipient of such grant was you or the organization(s) you are representing. You may list additional grants or contracts on additional sheets.</b>	
	
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