ASSESSING ATTACKS ON THE HOMELAND: FROM FORT HOOD TO BOSTON

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This testimony assesses the current state of the al Qaeda terrorist movement and its likely future trajectory. It considers the prevailing assumptions about al Qaeda and the threat that it poses; al Qaeda's current capacity for violence; and, its ability to plan strategically and implement terrorist operations. In this respect, even though the core al Qaeda group may be in decline, al Qaeda-ism, the movement's ideology, continues to resonate and attract new adherents. Al Qaeda thus remains an appealing brand in North and West Africa as well as in the Levant. The movement also retains its visceral hatred of the United States and the West along with the potential to inspire and motivate individuals to engage in deadly acts of homegrown terrorism, as we saw last April in Boston.

Today, the Core Al Qaeda organization is widely seen as on the verge of strategic collapse. The evidence supporting these claims is compelling. Osama bin Laden, the co-founder and leader of al Qaeda, is dead. The fourfold increase in targeted assassinations undertaken by the Obama Administration has thus far killed some three dozen key al Qaeda leaders, as well as nearly 250 of its fighters, thereby setting the core organization, in the words of a U.S. State Department analysis, "on a path of decline that will be difficult to reverse."

Although one cannot deny the vast inroads made against Core al Qaeda in recent years, the long-established nucleus of the al Qaeda organization has proven itself to be as resilient as it is formidable. For more than a decade, it has withstood arguably the greatest international onslaught directed against a terrorist organization in history. Further, it has consistently shown itself capable of adapting and adjusting to even the most consequential countermeasures directed against it, having, despite all odds, survived for a quarter century.

In this respect, the "Arab Spring," and especially the ongoing unrest and protracted civil war in Syria, have endowed the al Qaeda brand and, by extension, the core organisation, with new relevance and status that, depending on the future course of events in both that country and the surrounding region, could potentially resuscitate Core al Qaeda's waning fortunes. The fact that the al Qaeda Core seems to enjoy an unmolested existence from authorities in Pakistan, coupled with the forthcoming withdrawal of U.S. forces and ISAF troops from Afghanistan, further suggests that Core al Qaeda may well regain the breathing space and cross-border physical sanctuary needed to ensure its continued longevity.

Throughout its history, the oxygen that al Qaeda depends upon has ineluctably been its possession of, or access to, physical sanctuary and safe haven. In the turbulent wake of the "Arab Spring" and the political upheavals and instability that have followed, al Qaeda has the potential to transform toeholds established in the Levant and perhaps in the Sinai and in both North and West Africa into footholds——thus complementing its existing outposts in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia.

Hence, while bin Laden's death inflicted a crushing blow on al Qaeda, it is still not clear that it has necessarily been a fatal one. He left behind a resilient movement that, though seriously weakened, has nonetheless been expanding and consolidating its control in new and far-flung locales.

Today, al Qaeda is arguably situated in more places than it was on September 11, 2001. It maintains a presence in some fourteen different theatres of operation——compared to half as many as recently as five years ago. Although some of these operational environments are less amenable than others——such as Southeast Asia——others have been the sites of revival and resuscitation——such as in Iraq and North Africa——or of expansion——such as in Syria, Nigeria, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.

Al Qaeda has also been able to achieve the unthinkable: radicalizing persons who are citizens of or resident in the United States and Canada and inspiring and motivating them to engage in terrorist acts whether on their own, such as occurred at Fort Hood, Texas in 2009; or at the direction and behest of al Qaeda's senior leadership, such as the plot to stage suicide bomb attacks on the New York City subway system or the more recent plot to attack a Canadian train that was reportedly orchestrated by al Qaeda commanders based in Iran.

Bin Laden thus created a movement that, despite a decade of withering onslaught and attrition, continues to demonstrate its ability to:

- preserve a compelling brand;
- project a message that still finds an audience and adherents in disparate parts of the globe, however modest that audience may perhaps be;
- replenish its ranks (including those of its key leaders); and,
- pursue a strategy that continues to inform both the movement's and the core's operations and activities, and that today is effectively championed by Ayman al-Zawahiri.

In this respect, since 2002, al Qaeda has embraced a grand strategy for that was defined as much by al-Zawahiri as bin Laden. It is a plan that deliberately (and successfully) transformed it into a de-centralized, networked, transnational movement rather than the single monolithic entity that al Qaeda was on the eve of the September 11th 2001 attacks.

Accordingly, despite Core al Qaeda's alleged abject decrepitude today, the movement has nonetheless pursued a strategy designed to ensure its survival. Continuing to attack the U.S. is only one step in this strategic plan, which is also focused on:

- Attriting and enervating America so that a weakened U.S. would be forced out of Muslim lands and therefore have neither the will nor the capability to intervene;
- Taking over and controlling territory, creating the physical sanctuaries and safe havens that are al Qaeda's lifeblood; and
- Declaring "emirates" in these liberated lands that would be safe from U.S. and Western intervention because of our alleged collective enfeeblement.

Although it may be tempting to dismiss this as equal parts bravado and wishful thinking, as Johns Hopkins University Professor Mary Habeck has cogently observed, "No al Qaeda affiliate or partner——including the Taliban, al Qaeda in Iraq, or the Shabaab——has been deposed from power

by an uprising of the local population alone. They have needed outside intervention in order to expel the insurgents, even when the people have hated al Qaeda's often brutal rule." France's intervention in Mali earlier this year being the most recent example substantiating Professor Habeck's important point.

One can therefore make a reasonable argument that Core al Qaeda has:

- a well-established sanctuary in Pakistan that it functions in without great hindrance and that it is poised to expand across the border into Afghanistan as the U.S. military and ISAF continue to withdraw from that country, until the complete drawdown set for 2014;

- a deeper bench than has often been posited (or at least has been shown to be deeper at various critical junctures in the past when the Core al Qaeda's demise had been proclaimed);

- a defined and articulated strategy for the future that it is pursuing;

- a highly capable leader in al-Zawahiri who, over the past two years——despite predictions to the contrary——has been able not only to keep the movement alive, but also to expand its brand and forge new alliances(particularly in West African countries); and,

- a well-honed, long-established dexterity that enables it to be as opportunistic as it has been instrumental——that is, having the capability to identify and exploit whatever new opportunities for expansion and consolidation present themselves.

It is often said that, much like bin Laden's killing, the "Arab Spring" has sounded al Qaeda's death knell. However, while the mostly non-violent, mass protests of the "Arab Spring" were successful in overturning hated despots and thus appeared to discredit al Qaeda's longstanding message that only violence and jihad could achieve the same ends, in the more than two years since these dramatic developments commenced, evidence has repeatedly come to light of al Qaeda's ability to take advantage of the instability and upheaval in some of these same countries to re-assert its relevance and attempt to reverse its decline.

Moreover, while the "Arab Spring" has transformed governance across North Africa and the Middle East, it has had little effect on the periphery of that geographic expanse. The continued antipathy in Pakistan toward the U.S., coupled with the increasing activity of militant groups there——most of whom are already closely affiliated with Core al Qaeda——has, for instance, largely undermined the progress achieved in recent years against terrorism in South Asia. Further, the effects of the "Arab Spring" in Yemen, for instance, have clearly benefitted AQAP at the expense of the chronically weak central government in that country. AQAP in fact has been able to expand its reach considerably, seizing and controlling more territory, gaining new adherents and supporters, and continuing to innovate tactically as it

labors to extend its attack capabilities beyond the Arabian Peninsula. Although al Shabaab has been weakened in Somalia as a result of its expulsion from the capital, Mogadishu, and the deaths of two key Core al Qaeda commanders who had both embedded in the group and had enhanced appreciably its terrorist capabilities, al Shabaab nonetheless still maintains a stranglehold over the southern part of the country, where a terrible drought and famine threaten the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. Al Shabaab has also expanded its ambit of operations beyond Somalia to Kenya where, over the past two years, a variety of civilian as well as governmental targets——including churches and foreign tourists——have been attacked in operations frequently employing suicide bombers.

Meanwhile, the instability and disorders generated by the "Arab Spring" have created new opportunities for al Qaeda and its allies in the region to regroup and reorganize. Indeed, the number of failed or failing states or ungoverned spaces now variously found in the Sahel, in the Sinai, in parts of Syria and elsewhere has in fact increased in the aftermath of the changes witnessed across North Africa and the Middle East since 2011. In no place is this clearer or more consequential than in Syria. It is there, that al Qaeda's future——its power and perhaps even its longevity——turns.

Given these developments, several conclusions based on the preceding discussion may be posited that will likely affect Core al Qaeda's future trajectory:

• *First, al Qaeda is still strongest at the geographical periphery of the dramatic events of the past two years in North Africa and the Middle East*. Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen, as noted above, still remain key al Qaeda operational environments and sanctuaries and, in Yemen's case, rather than depriving al Qaeda of political space, the "Arab Spring" has created new opportunities in that country for AQAP's expansion and consolidation of its recent gains. Core al Qaeda demonstrably benefits from, and feeds off, these developments——thus promoting its longevity, at least for the foreseeable future.

• *Second, the conflict in Syria——and the attendant opportunities it presents to al Qaeda at a critical time in its history——has potentially breathed new life into the al Qaeda brand and movement*, exactly as Iraq did after 2003. Because of its effective intervention in Syria, al Qaeda's prospects are today brighter than arguably at any other time in the past decade.

• *Third, al Qaeda's core demographic has always been disenfranchised, disillusioned and marginalized youth*. There is no evidence that the potential pool of young "hot heads" to which al Qaeda's message has always been directed will necessary dissipate or constrict in light of the "Arab Spring." Moreover, it may likely grow in the future as impatience over the slow pace of democratisation and economic reform takes hold and many who took to the streets find themselves excluded from or deprived of the political and economic benefits that the upheavals in their countries promised. The recent events in Egypt, of course, being the most glaring and parlous case in point. The losers and disenchanted of the "Arab Spring" may thus provide a new reservoir of recruits for al Qaeda in the near future——especially in those countries across North Africa and the Middle East with proportionally high populations below the age of 20.

• *Fourth, the continued fragmentation of the jihadi movement as a result of bin Laden's killing and Core al Qaeda's weakening may paradoxically present new and daunting challenges to both regional and Western intelligence and security services*. The continual emergence of new, smaller, more dispersed terrorist entities with a more fluid membership that easily gravitates between and among groups that have little or no established modus operandi will raise difficulties in terms of identifying, tracking, anticipating and predicting threats. The authorities in Northern Ireland, for instance, encountered precisely this problem in the aftermath of the 1998 "Good Friday" accords, when the threat from a single, monolithic entity, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), devolved into the atomized threats presented by the smaller, less structured, more amorphous dissident Republican groups. A similar process has been noted by authorities in Indonesia following the collapse of Jemaah Islamiya, a close al Qaeda ally, and its splintering into smaller, more numerous lashkars or militias that have proven difficult to identify and track.

• *Fifth, the progeny of seminal jihadi leaders either killed or imprisoned over the past decade as a result of the war on terrorism may emerge as heirs to the movement bequeathed to them by their elders*. For instance, until his death in 2009, Saad bin Laden, Osama's eldest son, was being groomed to succeed his father. The prospect of additional sons, nephews, cousins and more distant relations of deceased or imprisoned jihadi leaders forming a new generation of fighters and filling leadership roles in Core al Qaeda is unnerving: not least because successive generations of the same terrorist organisations have shown themselves to be more lethally violent than their predecessors.

• *Sixth, there is the problem of the "old made new": former leaders or senior level fighters who emerge from prison or exile to assume key positions of command of new or existing terrorist organisations, including Core al Qaeda, and thus revitalize and reinvigorate flagging or dormant terrorist groups*. This same development of course led to the formation of the AQAP in early 2009. Egyptian President Morsi's pardon of sixteen leading jihadi prisoners from the al Gama'a Islamiyya and al Jihad's groups and the amnesties granted to hundreds of others have the potential to infuse existing local and regional organizations with greater militancy and violence. In addition, at least a dozen or more key Core al Qaeda personnel are still sheltering in Iran, including Saif al-Adl. If allowed their freedom, they could easily strengthen the existing central leadership.

• *Finally, the continued absence of a successful, major al Qaeda attack in North America since 2001 may induce a period of quiet and calm that lulls us into a state of false complacency*, lowering our guard and, in turn, provoking al Qaeda or one of its allies to chance a dramatically spectacular attack in the U.S.

None of the above is pre-ordained, much less certain. At least three scenarios are possible. In the first, the Core al Qaeda organization continues to degenerate and eventually becomes a post-modern, desperate movement with a set of loose ideas and ideologies. This would be accompanied by the continued ascendance of affiliates and associated groups within a broad ideological and strategic framework bequeathed by the core organization.

A second scenario would see Core al Qaeda's continued weakening which produces an even more fragmented jihadi movement. These smaller,

less capable entities would continue to pose a terrorist threat, but a far weaker, more sporadic and perhaps less consequential one. However, as previously noted, they would likely be more difficult to track, identify, and counter.

A third scenario is dependent upon whether Syria re-vitalizes the al Qaeda Core and attendant movement. The big question is whether al Qaeda can avoid making the same mistakes that previously undermined its struggle in Iraq, for instance, and how successful Core al Qaeda continues to be at balancing relations with its local and regional affiliated and associated groups.

Regardless of which scenario materializes, the continuing challenge that the U.S. faces is that al Qaeda's core ideology remains attractive to a hard core of radicals and capable of drawing new adherents into ranks. Even in death, Anwar al-Awlaqi has proven to be an effective recruiting sergeant.

Indeed, the latest recruits to this struggle are the Tsarnaev brothers——products of centuries-long conflict between Russia and Chechnya. The violence inflicted on Muslims in general and Muslim women and children around the world have been cited by many other homegrown terrorists as a salient motivating factor in their politicization and radicalization. This may also explain why the American invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan were cited by Dzhogar Tsarev as the reasons behind his and his older brother's bombing of the Boston Marathon.

There is no one path to radicalization. The reasons why someone picks up a gun or blows themselves up are ineluctably personal, born variously of grievance and frustration; religious piety or the desire for systemic socio-economic change; irredentist conviction or commitment to revolution. And yet, though there is no universal terrorist personality, nor has a single, broadly applicable profile ever been produced, there are things we do know. Terrorists are generally motivated by a profound sense of——albeit, misguided——altruism; deep feelings of self-defense; and, if they are religiously observant or devout, an abiding, even unswerving, commitment to their faith and the conviction that their violence is not only theologically justified, but divinely commanded.

Theological arguments in this context are invoked both by the organizations responsible for the attacks and by the communities from which the terrorists are recruited. In the case of Muslims, although the Quran forbids both suicide and the infliction of wanton violence, pronouncements have been made by radical Muslim clerics, and in some instances have been promulgated as fatwas (Islamic religious edicts), affirming the legitimacy of violence in defense of defenseless peoples and to resist the invasion of Muslim lands. Among the most prominent was the declaration by the Ayatollah Khomeini who once declared (in the context of the Shi'a interpretation of Islam) that he knew of no command "more binding to the Muslim than the command to sacrifice life and property to defend and bolster Islam." Radical Islamist terrorist movements have thus created a recruitment and support mechanism of compelling theological incentives that sustain their violent campaigns and seeks vengeance——despite America's withdrawal from Iraq and impending departure from Afghanistan.

Individuals will always be attracted to violence in different ways. Just look at the people who have gravitated towards terrorism in the

U.S. in recent years. We have seen terrorists of South Asian and North as well as East African descent as well as those hailing both from the Middle East and Caribbean. We have seen life-long devout Muslims as well as recent converts——including one Philadelphia suburban housewife who touted her petite stature and blonde hair and blue eyes as being so atypical of the stereotypical terrorist so as to defy any efforts at profiling. Radicalized over the Internet, she sought to use her self-described ability to avoid detection to assassinate a Swedish artist who drew an offensive cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad.

These radicalized persons come from every walk of life, from marginalized people working in menial jobs, some with long criminal records or histories of juvenile delinquency, to persons from solidly middle and upper-middle class backgrounds with university and perhaps even graduate degrees and prior passions for cars, sports, rock music and other completely secular and material interests.

Relationships formed at work, at school, on sports teams, and other recreational and religious activities as well as over the Internet can prey upon the already susceptible. In some instances, first generation sons and daughters of immigrants embrace an interpretation of their religion and heritage that is more political, more extreme and more austere——and thereby demands greater personal sacrifices——than that practiced by their parents.

Indeed, the common element in the radicalization process reflects these individuals' deep commitment to their faith——often recently re-discovered; their admiration of terrorist movements or leading terrorist figures who they see as having struck a cathartic blow for their creed's enemies wherever they are and whomever they might be; hatred of their adopted homes, especially if in the U.S. and the West; and, a profoundly shared sense of alienation from their host countries.

At the start of the war on terrorism a dozen years ago the enemy was clear and plainly in sight. It was a large terrorist organization, situated mostly in one geographic location, and it was led by an identifiable leader. Today, when the borders between domestic and international terrorism have blurred, when our adversaries are not only identifiable organizations but enigmatic individuals, a complete re-thinking of our counterterrorism policies and architecture is needed. We built an effective defense against the previous threat. Our challenge today is to develop new defenses against this new more amorphous, diffuse and individualized threat while at the same time to continue to destroy and upend al Qaeda, its affiliates and associates, and most especially the ideology that fuels and sustains it.