

Testimony before the Homeland Security Committee U.S. House of Representatives  
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Thank you, Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, distinguished Members of this Committee. I am grateful for the opportunity to appear before you to testify today.

Let me begin by commending you for holding this hearing. In the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, the overwhelming focus of our government and of the American people was on the threat of terrorism. Twelve years later, that is no longer the case. Our loss of focus is in part a consequence of the success we have achieved--namely, the fact that we have not had another catastrophic attack on our homeland since that terrible Tuesday morning in September, 2001.

The absence of such an attack, however, is not because of an absence of terrorist plots or plans against us. Rather, it has been the consequence of vigilance, determination, courage, and creativity by national security professionals and national leaders across two Administrations, as well as the close cooperation and help of America's allies and partners around the world. It is also due to a series of sweeping national security reforms and innovations enacted in the aftermath of 9/11 that have made our nation safer.

Pride in this achievement, however, must be tempered by an awareness of several harsh realities. First, al Qaeda and its affiliates remain a ruthless, determined, and *adaptive* adversary. Second, 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. It manifests itself not just in al Qaeda but in terrorist organizations that are either unaffiliated with al Qaeda or loosely affiliated with it.

For that reason, our safety as a nation is ultimately inseparable from our own ability to adapt to meet this changing threat. It also requires that we stay engaged in the world beyond our borders. That is the best way to prevent another terrorist attack against America like the one that occurred on 9/11.

Yet increasingly we hear voices--on both sides of the political spectrum--who say that the threat from terrorism is receding, the end of this conflict is here or near, and therefore that we can withdraw from much of the rest of the world.

This narrative is badly and dangerously mistaken.

There is no question, the United States--under President Bush and 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 by the American military from neighboring Afghanistan after 9/11.

To borrow a phrase from General David Petraeus, while the progress we have achieved against core al Qaeda is real and significant 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," which some now advocate--you can be sure 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 now 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. Yet now it is al Qaeda that is surging back in Iraq, hoisting its black flag over cities like Fallujah and Ramadi, murdering hundreds of innocent Iraqis this year, with violence surging back to 2008 levels.

This leads to an important conclusion. While space for core al Qaeda in tribal Pakistan has been shrunk thanks to persistent U.S. action in recent years, new territory where al Qaeda affiliates can find sanctuary has grown significantly during this same period, in the Middle East, North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Al Qaeda and other Islamist extremist groups have long exploited Muslim-majority countries that have been 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 today they are fighting to build sanctuaries in Syria, Iraq and Libya.

Several factors make the prospect of al Qaeda sanctuaries in these three countries especially dangerous for the U.S. and our allies. The first is their respective locations. Syria and Iraq are in the heart of the Arab Middle East, bordering key American allies like Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Turkey, and Israel. Libya and Syria are Mediterranean countries--comparatively easy to reach by terrorist recruits 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.

In the face of the clear, present, and increasing threat to America and our allies from these places, American policymakers have signaled that any involvement by the U.S. military is for all intents and purposes off the table. This means that the United States is not effectively able to assist our local allies in combating the rise of al Qaeda in these countries. It also means that we are failing to help deal with the underlying conditions that are making al Qaeda's resurgence possible.

Put very bluntly, I do not see a credible or coherent U.S. strategy right now for exactly those countries--Syria, Iraq, and Libya--that most threaten to emerge as al Qaeda's newest and most

dangerous footholds--places, from which terrorist attacks against our homeland can and will originate.

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

This failure, it should be added, has consequences for our national security that extend far beyond counterterrorism. Across the Middle East and beyond, the credibility of American leadership is being questioned as it has not been for a very longtime. Among friends and enemies alike, there are doubts about our staying power; questions about our reliability as an ally; and suspicions that, at the end of the day, we will hesitate to back up our promises and historic commitments with the use of force--if necessary.

This is the reality of how the United States is seen right now in too much of the rest of the world.

Some in Washington look at what is happening in Syria, Iraq, and Libya and downplay their significance for our security, and with it, our need to get involved. Yes, al Qaeda-affiliated groups are there, these skeptics say, but they are mostly focused on fighting other Muslims. The situation is confusing and chaotic, we are told, and these Sunni-Shia conflicts have gone on forever. It is "someone else's civil war" is a familiar refrain we are hearing often again.

But keep in mind that twenty years ago, during the 1990s, most people in Washington dismissed what was happening in Afghanistan as "someone else's civil war." And thus began the road to 9/11. I fear very much that twenty years from now or less, someone else will be sitting here, testifying before this committee, saying much the same about pulling back from Syria, Libya, and Iraq today.

What do I believe the U.S. can and should do now to protect our people against future 9-11 attacks? First, I do not advocate sending tens of thousands of troops to these countries. Nor do I believe it is within our power, or our responsibility, to solve every problem these countries face. These are hollow straw man arguments against what we can and should do.

And there is much we can and should be doing today that we are not. In Syria, we can much more aggressively and creatively provide militarily-relevant support to non-extremist rebel forces. In Iraq, we can make clear to the government that we are willing to support Iraqis against al Qaeda with U.S. airpower, as well as putting a small number of embedded advisors on the ground, while using that increased assistance as leverage to encourage political reconciliation. 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 balkanized, poorly-resourced, decades-long effort now in place.

And in Afghanistan, we can choose not to squander the gains of the past decade and dishonor the brave Americans who lost or risked their lives there. Instead we can keep a sufficient follow-on military presence to sustain the increasingly capable and courageous Afghan National Security Forces in our shared fight against al Qaeda and the Taliban, that will also safeguard the gains that have been made in human rights and human development more broadly, particularly among Afghan women, all of which will be erased if the Taliban returns.

None of these possible actions by the U.S. represent simple or quick solutions. There are no easy solutions to the problems here. 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 here at home.

It is worth noting that, in all of these countries, we have repeatedly seen that al Qaeda and its extremist vision for society 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 popular movements with the help and support they need to succeed, or leave them on their own to fail.

This is especially urgent in Syria right now. In just the past several days, there has been a grassroots uprising in the northern part of the country against the al Qaeda affiliate in Syria, because al Qaeda has alienated the local population with its brutality and violence. The question is, do we now come to the aid of these rebels who are in a two front fight against al Qaeda and Bashar al Assad—which is to say, against Iran—and who desperately need our help? If we fail to do so, and al Qaeda defeats them, the consequences will be dire not only for Syria, but for our own national security.

Let me make one final point. The Obama Administration has repeatedly narrowed the rhetorical scope of this conflict from what it criticized as an amorphous and open-ended “war on terrorism” to an armed conflict against a discrete and identifiable group: al Qaeda and its affiliates. Our goal, the President has said, is to disrupt and ultimately dismantle the entity known as al Qaeda and those affiliated with it.

There is an argument for this approach. After all, the enemy we are fighting is not “terrorism,” which is simply a tactic. But an organization-centric approach to counterterrorism, as the Obama Administration has advocated, is ultimately inadequate because al Qaeda as an organization can be eviscerated, but it will regenerate as long as the ideology that inspires it survives. An organization-centric approach may also inadvertently cause us to miss the threat posed by groups that share al Qaeda’s ideology and ambitions to harm us, but that lack meaningful organizational ties to it. Indeed, it seems plausible that this is part of what happened in Benghazi in 2012.

The fact is, ultimate success in the struggle we are in depends not simply on the death of particular terrorist leaders or the destruction of a particular terrorist group, 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 governance by perverting religion. The enemy, we can never stress enough, is *not* Islam itself.

Nor, I would add, our enemy is political Islam per se. In fact, there are political 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.

In fact, such Islamists--operating in a democratic framework--may ultimately prove to be the most powerful and effective force to delegitimize and destroy violent Islamist extremism. Conversely, repressive regimes in Muslim countries are likely in the long run to radicalize people and push them towards violent extremism. For this reason, the U.S. does have a core national interest in the political development of the Muslim world towards greater freedom.

Mr. Chairman, the progress we have made since 9/11 in securing our homeland 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 familiar words of a great statesman of the last century, speaking of a very different struggle against another totalitarian foe.

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" of our war against violent Islamist extremism. If so, that should give us reason to hope--but also grounds to recognize much danger, difficulty, and hard work lies ahead.