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“Assessing the Threat to the Homeland from Al-Qaeda Operations in Iran and Syria”

Chairman King, members of the subcommittee, my sincere thanks for the opportunity to testify here today on issues which I believe should concern us all more and more. That concern should be shared not just by those who live in America, but by non-American citizens who care about America’s security.

SYRIA AND THE REGION

The ongoing conflict in Syria is quite rightly of significant concern to the international community. This is not just because tens of thousands have now died – but because of the presence of significant amount of jihadist militants, including members of al-Qaeda.

The al-Qaeda group currently operating in Syria is called Jabhat al-Nusra, which controls parts of eastern Syria and has carried out a string of suicide bombings.

Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani, Jabhat al-Nusra’s leader, last month pledged allegiance to the *emir* of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri.

It is estimated that the number of Western fighters operating in Syria is in the low to mid hundreds. Despite these relatively small numbers, there are a multitude of reasons to be concerned about the potential fallout from Syria – not just in the region, but how it could impact the US homeland.

At present there have not been any attempted attacks on the US by those who have fought in Syria. However, there is now evidence of other countries being targeted by those who have.

The first is Belgium. Last week, it was reported that their security services intercepted a call from an extremist based in Syria, who was discussing a potential attack on the Brussels Palace of Justice with a contact in Belgium.

Going further back, it was reported in October of last year that Jordanian authorities disrupted a significant plot against civilian and government targets, including potentially the U.S. Embassy in Amman.

The Jordanian cell that connected in Syria was only thought to have been acquaintances prior to their shared experience fighting there. Afterwards, they had access to huge amounts of weaponry and explosives, as well as combat experience and a shared ideological inspiration to attack a foreign country.

The Jordanian individuals in this plot were connected to al-Qaeda's affiliate in Iraq, and I believe it is impossible to consider the threat emanating from this region without considering what is happening in Iraq.

The State Department has now designated Jabhat al-Nusra as an alias for al-Qaeda in Iraq. Abu Dua, the emir of that group, announced last month that Jabhat al-Nusra was simply a 'branch' of al-Qaeda in Iraq. It has been reported in recent days that Abu Dua has now entered northern Syria in order to get an even stronger grip on al-Qaeda's operations there.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq provides funding to Jabhat al-Nusra, as well as sharing fighters and the joint aspiration to overthrow Bashar al-Assad. However, the relationship between the two groups is not entirely straightforward. Al-Jawlani has distanced himself from Abu Dua's claim of Jabhat al-Nusra simply being an extension of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Furthermore, al-Jawlani's pledge of allegiance to al-Zawahiri does not necessarily make Jabhat al-Nusra a formal part of the al-Qaeda network. For example, members of al-Shabaab in Somalia pledged loyalty to al-Qaeda's *emir* – at that stage Osama bin Laden – two and a half years before they were officially accepted by al-Qaeda as a formal franchise.

IRAN

The conflict in Syria contains significant influence from Iran, one of the biggest supporters of the Assad regime.

Iranian links to al-Qaeda have come under review following last month's foiled train attack in Canada, and the suggestion that the two plotters were being guided by al-Qaeda elements in Iran.

It would be surprising if the Canadian plot was Iranian government sanctioned. Al-Qaeda would not be willing to be used as a proxy by the Iranian government in the way that, for example, Hizbollah would. There is too much distrust on both sides. I believe it is more likely that Iran were either not aware of al-Qaeda's activities with regards to the Canadian plot, or they were and simply chose to look the other way.

There is some truth in the suggestion that Iran's connections to al-Qaeda are often largely overlooked. The Shia-Sunni sectarian split is seen as making any collaboration between the two a non-starter. However, there is evidence of engagement on some level.

For example, Osama bin Laden met with Imad Mughniyah, a senior member of Hizbollah, in the early 1990s. It is thought that al-Qaeda subsequently received explosives training from the group. Furthermore, Iran facilitated al-Qaeda members' travel in and out of Afghanistan

prior to 9/11. Senior al-Qaeda leaders close to Osama bin Laden fled there after the invasion of Afghanistan, before being placed under a form of house arrest by early 2002.

There is the possibility that Iran envisaged using some of these al-Qaeda operatives as a bargaining chip with the US, or as a deterrent against attack on Iranian soil.

Iran and al-Qaeda do also have shared enemies – the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia being the obvious ones. Therefore it is at least conceivable that Iran would allow al-Qaeda's operatives limited scope to undertake activities against their shared enemies in return for not targeting Iran itself.

While many of the al-Qaeda operatives in Iran have now been released, it is certain that there is still an al-Qaeda presence there.

However, I believe this potential for interaction should not distract us from the potentially significant differences that do still exist between the two. These differences have on occasion played themselves out geopolitically.

In Syria, Iran is supporting Assad at a time al-Qaeda are attempting to overthrow him. Al-Zawahiri has publicly lambasted Iran's role in the conflict. The perception of an increasingly influential Iran is something that al-Zawahiri has been warning of for several years. Al-Zawahiri has also at times portrayed Iran as a strategic threat, rather than an ally.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq has a visceral hatred for Iran, which it regards as being a *de facto* ruler of the current Iraqi government.

Therefore, despite the interaction that certainly does exist between the two, there are still question marks concerning the precise nature of the relationship between al-Qaeda and Iran.

However, there are also differences between franchises within al-Qaeda itself.

The complex dynamics between al-Qaeda in Iraq and Jabhat al-Nusra mirrors a wider ambiguity as to the precise dynamics between al-Qaeda's senior leadership and its affiliates.

For example, in the documentation discovered at Abbottabad, the revulsion that members of al-Qaeda's core feel for their Iraqi franchise is clear, with suggestions that there is little operational interaction between the two.

This is evidence of not only the increased importance of localised autonomy within the al-Qaeda movement today, but also the increased decentralisation of its leadership structure.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, let me address some of what should be key concerns for homeland security. In the short term: the impact of Western fighters returning from Syria. In the long term: the fallout from a perceived lack of involvement by the West.

I have in recent years co-authored three reports on terrorism trends from the late 1990s onwards. This includes two editions of a publication called *Islamist Terrorism: The British*

Connections, and most recently a publication called *Al-Qaeda in the United States: A Complete Analysis of Terrorism Offenses*. These reports provide a statistical analysis of the background of all individuals who were convicted in the US and UK for Islamism or al-Qaeda related offenses, or who had committed suicide attacks there.

As part of this most recent research I studied which of those who had fought in conflict zones abroad – for example in Chechnya, Bosnia or Kashmir – then went on to attempt mass casualty terrorist attacks after leaving the battlefield.

Those that have attacked, or tried to attack, the West tended to be cells who had received terrorist training abroad and then returned to their country of origin specifically to carry out an operation.

In both the UK and US, it was extremely rare for those with combat experience to try and launch domestic attacks once they returned home.

This may seem like a glimmer of a silver lining, but it is worth stressing that there is no guarantee that this will remain the case.

The war in Syria could have other knock-on effects. For example, as with the jihad of the 1980s and 1990s, Syria will give legitimacy to a new generation of fighters. Those who have fought there could go on to become key ideologues, with their experiences in Syria serving as an inspiration for future generations of aspiring militants. This is precisely what happened with conflicts such as those in Afghanistan and Kashmir, and there is no reason to think Syria will be different.

Furthermore, it is worth remembering that inaction can have just as much impact as intervention. It is often assumed that US intervention in Iraq had a radicalising effect on Muslim communities. Yet consider the radicalising impact of a less discussed war: that in Bosnia. The West had considerably less involvement in Bosnia than it did in Iraq and yet, in Europe, ideologues attempted to persuade Muslim communities that Western inaction meant Western acquiescence in the slaughter of Bosnian Muslims.

Therefore, there remains a host of things to concern us about the fallout from Syria in both the short and long term.

Thank you all for listening to my thoughts on this today, and I would be delighted to answer any questions you may have.