



214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE • Washington DC 20002 • (202) 546-4400 •
heritage.org

CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

**Jihadist Safe Havens: Efforts to
Detect and Deter Terrorist Travel**

Testimony before

**The Homeland Security Committee
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and
Intelligence**

U.S. House of Representatives

July 24, 2014

**Dr. Peter Brookes
Senior Fellow for National Security Affairs
The Heritage Foundation**

The Heritage Foundation is a public policy, research, and educational organization recognized as exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. It is privately supported and receives no funds from any government at any level, nor does it perform any government or other contract work.

The Heritage Foundation is the most broadly supported think tank in the United States. During 2012, it had nearly 71,000 individual, foundation, and corporate supporters representing every state in the U.S. Its 2012 income came from the following sources:

Individuals	81%
Foundations	14%
Corporations	5%

The top five corporate givers provided The Heritage Foundation with 2 percent of its 2012 income. The Heritage Foundation's books are audited annually by the national accounting firm of McGladrey & Pullen. A list of major donors is available from The Heritage Foundation upon request.

Members of The Heritage Foundation staff testify as individuals discussing their own independent research. The views expressed are their own and do not reflect an institutional position for The Heritage Foundation or its board of trustees.

**The Testimony of
Dr. Peter Brookes
Before
The Homeland Security Committee
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence
U.S. House of Representatives
July 24, 2014**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to share my views on the subject of today's hearing. I want to commend you, the Committee, and your staff for highlighting this issue in this public setting. In my view, it comes none too soon.

Before I begin my testimony, let me say that the views I express today are my own and should not be construed as representing the official position of any of the organizations with which I am associated.

On the topic of today's hearing, I would like to make three fundamental points.

Quite simply, it is my view that Islamist militancy is on the march. Second, I believe we are facing increasing threats to the homeland as a result. And third, I have concerns about current U.S. policy for dealing with it.

Let me briefly expand on these points.

Islamist militancy is on the move.

I never would have thought that nearly 13 years after the 9/11 tragedy that we would still be dealing with the threat of Islamist terrorism, especially that associated with al Qaeda, at such an elevated level.

The al Qaeda threat, whether by groups that have a direct association with al Qaeda's core, exist as an off-shoot, or merely embrace its ideology, has proliferated significantly in recent years in my judgment.

The increasing diversity and the intensity of the Islamist terrorist threat, in my mind, means we have to defend against a growing number of different threat vectors, making it more difficult for our intelligence, law enforcement, and military efforts to succeed, whether at home or overseas.

We are all painfully aware of the rise of violent extremists across the globe. Indeed, the State Department reports that terrorist attacks were up more than 40 percent last year.

Syria is a good example, and should be of significant concern, considering the estimated number of violent jihadists that have gathered there to oppose the Bashar Assad regime.

As the Committee knows, an estimated 7,000-12,000 foreign fighters from some 70-80 countries have reportedly gathered in Syria, perhaps constituting what experts believe is the largest contingent of violent extremists in any one place at any one time, including in pre-9/11 Afghanistan.

Iraq is also deeply afflicted with terrorism, especially the resurgence of al Qaeda in Iraq off-shoots, which seemed to have been almost extinguished by the end of the U.S. surge in Iraq. Last year, Iraq suffered some 5,000-9,000 casualties as a result of terrorist and sectarian violence, according to various sources.

Of course, perhaps, the most troubling development is the rise of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) which has set about capturing—and perhaps holding—a swath of significant territory that spans both Iraq and Syria.

Within this territory, ISIS has declared a caliphate, which not only threatens the regimes in Baghdad and Damascus, but which may prove over time to be a safe haven for terrorist planning, training, and operations beyond Iraq and Syria.

This newest caliphate is likely to resonate with Islamists on a number of levels around the globe. The allure of a new Islamist state may lead to more recruits, funding, and alliances. Moreover, ISIS' early success may encourage others to undertake the same thing elsewhere.

Indeed, even prior to the establishment of the "Islamic State," there were reports of the development of camps for not only training fighters for opposing the Syrian and Iraqi regimes, but for training foreign fighters to return to their native lands, especially Europe and the United States, to undertake terror attacks there.

Of course, the problem is not limited to Iraq and Syria.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which is resident in Yemen, may be the most dangerous al Qaeda affiliate today. It has held territory in Southern Yemen and its bomb-making prowess is well-known based on a number of spectacular plots by its innovative explosives expert, Ibrahim al Asiri.

In South Asia, Taliban and Haqqani Network violence is up in Afghanistan as the number of U.S. and foreign forces draws down, according to news outlets. These terror groups have historically found safe haven in neighboring Pakistan, which has severely impacted U.S. and Coalition counterinsurgency and terror operations in Afghanistan.

In Africa, terrorists and violent extremists are thriving as well. In Libya, the situation remains chaotic three years after the U.S.-NATO operation led to the demise of Libyan strongman Moammar Qaddafi. Libyan militias, including al Qaeda associated groups like Ansar al Sharia, continue to threaten any semblance of stability.

Of course, Libya was the location of the deadly September 11, 2012 attack on our diplomatic facilities in Benghazi.

Algeria is afflicted by al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM); it has been linked to recent plots in France on the Eiffel Tower, Louvre and a nuclear power plant, according to news accounts.

AQIM is also active in nearby Mali, where violence is on the up-swing after a French intervention slowed the terror group's advance. Moreover, press reports indicate that al Qaeda linked militants in Mali may be working with Nigeria's Boko Haram, a terror group causing increasing alarm.

News accounts indicate that fighting with Boko Haram Islamist militants in Nigeria has resulted in the death of some 2,000 people this year, the tragic kidnapping of hundreds of school girls aside. It also reportedly operates in Cameroon and Niger.

Across the continent in Somalia and Kenya, al Shabab—noted for its brazen Westgate Mall attack in 2013—is gaining ground. The terror group also seems to be a significant draw for prospective militants from the United States, according to some research.

Indeed, some analysts believed that al Shabab may have drawn or recruited more Americans than any other terror group, but it has now likely been outpaced by a surge to Syria and Iraq. Moreover, some assert al Shabab is cooperating and coordinating with Boko Haram, further expanding the terror network on the continent.

In general, lawless, ungoverned, and or chaotic places remain a significant counterterrorism problem.

Increasing threats to the homeland

What does this militant Islamist movement mean? In my opinion, it signifies that we are facing an increasing threat not only to U.S. interests overseas, but to the homeland.

I do not have to tell the Committee about the reports of nearly a hundred Americans and as many as 3,000 Europeans that have traveled to Syria—and perhaps now Iraq—to fight in the Syrian (and perhaps now Iraqi) civil war(s).

We must assume that based on open-source reporting that some of these Americans and Europeans will be recruited and trained in the terrorist dark arts while in Iraq and Syria with the intention of returning to their native countries to commit terror, if reports are accurate.

Recent violence and plots in places like Britain, Belgium, and Spain that are related to Syria means that the threat is not a prospective one, but one that is here and now.

Specifically, the recent reports of a possible terror plot involving explosive cell phones and or electronic devices that might be targeting US-bound airliners out of Europe is of great concern—and may arguably represent the most imminent terror threat to the U.S. homeland today.

Even more troubling are the reports that this plot involved a synergistic effort between al Qaeda operatives in Syria/Iraq and AQAP bomb-makers. This sort of transnational terrorist teamwork is very disconcerting.

But we should not be surprised.

Al Qaeda, including Osama bin Laden, has long valued zealous religious converts, recruiting operatives in place, including via the Internet, and travelers with passports that may be in or enter a target country with limited scrutiny to perform terrorist acts.

While not all of these al Qaeda groups are directly targeting the U.S. homeland currently, we should not embrace the notion that this view will not change in the future; their objectives will not necessarily remain local or regional.

In my view, these terror groups, whose goals may seem local or regional at this time, may have fundamental needs that might need to be satisfied first (e.g., holding territory for planning, training and operating; securing funding; and finding recruits) before looking at expanding their operations afield such as toward the United States.

Furthermore, from a strategic perspective, these terror groups may not want to encourage or give reason for opposition from the United States at this time.

The point here being is that we should not assume that any seemingly overseas al Qaeda threat will stay that way and not evolve into a direct threat to the U.S. homeland. Indeed, intent can change quickly and may not be discovered by intelligence before it is too late.

While each terror group is unique, hostility toward the United States is a common characteristic, in my opinion.

U.S. Policy Concerns

While I understand and appreciate the hard work being done by intelligence, law enforcement, the military and others in battling violent extremists and protecting the American homeland, I have concerns about current U.S. policy.

First, the rhetoric used by the Obama administration has been misleading, in my view. Over time, the White House, including the President, has characterized al Qaeda as “on the run,” “on its heels,” and “decimated,” and so forth.

Suggesting such, especially as concerns al Qaeda writ large, is unfortunately disingenuous. While the White House occasionally specified that it was referring to “al Qaeda core” (essentially the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks in Pakistan and Afghanistan) when it spoke of the terror group’s supposedly diminished status, that was not always the case.

Indeed, I would suggest that the White House was attempting to create a narrative on its handling of national security, specifically al Qaeda, that was arguably overly optimistic. Worse, it may have given the American public—and others—the impression that al Qaeda was in its last throes.

The take down of Osama bin Laden supported that narrative.

The problem is that, yes, Osama bin Laden was dead, but al Qaeda was still very much alive. I do not believe that this reality was conveyed accurately or adequately to the American people by the administration when it should have been part of our national security dialogue and debate.

I believe that the early, public Benghazi attack assessments, such as references to a provocative video, were also driven by the White House’s chosen, perhaps politically-driven, national security narrative.

Second, I am also troubled by other national security decisions. For instance, I believe the decision to withdraw from Iraq without the provision

of follow-on forces directly contributed to, along with other factors, the dire situation that exists there today.

In addition, I believe that the security vacuum that will be left by the draw-down of U.S. forces in Afghanistan in the coming years, which could result in a total withdrawal, could be filled by al Qaeda affiliated groups over time as happened in Iraq.

Third, from a practical standpoint, I believe that a reluctance to influence or follow through on events in the Middle East/North Africa such as Libya and the Arab Spring, especially the events in Syria, has not served our national interests well.

Indeed, while a direct cause and effect is difficult to prove, I would suggest that a case could be made which claims that the failure of U.S. policies in Iraq and Syria had a hand in the success of ISIS today which now stands as a significant national security threat.

Fourth, I am concerned that much of the world sees the United States in absolute—or at least relative—decline. I also believe that perceptions of American inattention, disinterest, or weakness in world affairs will drive policies and actions directed toward us, including provocations from militant Islamist extremists.

Fifth, I am also worried that U.S. counterterrorism policy is meant more to contain than eliminate al Qaeda threats. In other words, we are containing threats in places like Syria/Iraq or Yemen, but not acting vigorously enough, or at all, to eliminate them.

Relying too heavily on the political will of foreign governments and the capabilities of other nations' counterterror forces or militaries to battle terror groups may be a losing, indeed dangerous, strategy whether it is Iraq, Afghanistan, or Yemen.

Specifically, I believe that we are facing increasing threats to our interests overseas and to the homeland as a result of our failure to develop effective counterterror policies, which have provided space for terrorists to plan, train, and operate.

Conclusion

I would assert that parts of the world are aflame with Islamist militancy—and that we are in the crosshairs. Wishing away the terrorist threat we face at home or abroad will not make it disappear. Indeed, worse, we are at risk of creating complacency at home and abroad about this growing threat.

Complacency about such a challenge can be a killer. We have already weathered some 60 terrorist plots and or attacks since 9/11, according to Heritage Foundation data. This is clearly no time for contentment with the status quo.

The concern is that some believe we are in a post-Osama bin Laden era. That is factually correct, but we are *not* in a post-terrorism or post-al Qaeda period in my judgment. Osama bin Laden's and al Qaeda's inspirational Islamist ideology of political violence lives on in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Nigeria, Libya, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

Letting our guard down to this growing Islamist extremist reality would be a huge mistake—and a major threat to our security and interests both at home and abroad.

Dr. Peter Brookes is a Heritage Foundation senior fellow. He is also a Commissioner with the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. Prior to his work at The Heritage Foundation, he served as a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, a professional staff member with the House International Relations Committee, the CIA, the State Department and in the U.S. Navy. He is a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, the Defense Language Institute, the Naval War College, the Johns Hopkins University, and Georgetown University.