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The Evolving Threat and Effective Counter Terrorism Strategies

Introduction

Thank you Mr. Chairman, it is my pleasure to testify again before you today, but as a civilian, not a government employee. And BTW, that gives me a bit more leeway in what I have to say. And it is humbling to be here with these two giants of counter terrorism and personal heroes of mine – both of whom I have known and worked with for years – before and after 9-11.

This morning I will discuss the trends in the terrorist threat, evaluate our counter measures and make a few observations about future policies.

Good News - Bad News

Let me start by saying there is good news and bad news.

The good news is that since 9-11, our nation has been successful in denying AQ, ISIS or any of their affiliates from conducting a strategic level attack against our homeland.

The bad news is that over the past six years the number of violent jihadis around the world has increased dramatically. In addition, there are a growing number of conflict zones across the Islamic world -- from South Asia to the Levant and across all of Africa. These conflicts have provided opportunities for the expansion of AQ and ISIS from their traditional strong holds and have exacerbated the anger of homegrown terrorists in Europe and in the United States.

During the past few years, three armies that we armed and trained collapsed in front of lightly armed militia groups -- in Mali in 2012, Iraq in 2014 and Yemen in 2015 – providing our enemy tons of weapons, ammunition and vehicles.

In addition, Iran has increased its malevolent behavior in the past several years, training and arming violent militia groups, stoking sectarian tensions and exacerbating conflicts in a brazen attempt to expand their influence in the region.

These setbacks overseas coincided with a burst of terror attacks in France and Belgium – as well as in Boston, San Bernardino and Tampa.

Things have improved lately -- and we need not panic – nor expend the lives of our troops or our national treasure needlessly. But, additional action is needed to respond to this troubling turn of events in the past three years.

The Evolving Threat

First, let me expand upon the nature of the threat.

AQ conducted three strategic attacks from August 1998 to Sept 11 2001 -- and none since 9-11 -- a remarkable record of success on our part -- and what can only be described as a massive strategic failure on the part of AQ.

Post 9-11 Success

There have been between 12 and 15 terrorist attacks in the USA since 9-11 – and about 100 deaths -- depending on how you count them. These are tragedies for the victims and their families – but have not had a strategic impact on our country.

Additionally, contrary to what many pundits have predicted in the aftermath of 9-11, Americans, from Boston to New York, from Tampa to San Bernadino – have not overreacted or cowered in the face of terrorist attacks – but instead they have been resilient and gone about living their lives without fear.

Bad News: Deteriorating Conditions Across the Globe

Since the Arab Spring, the Islamic world has been beset with ever-expanding conflicts from east to west.

Currently, in the Islamic world there are at least four failed states: Syria, Yemen, Somalia and Libya. There are at least five states with major areas of ungoverned space including Pakistan (the FATA), Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan and Mali. In addition there are several other states with conflicts of varying degrees of violence and ungoverned space such as the southern Philippines, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and the Sinai region of Egypt. The roots of many of these conflicts are complex and go back many years -- but most have been exacerbated since the Arab Spring and the involvement of radical jihadis.

Each of these conflicts has its own unique characteristics – it is impossible to generalize about them – or underestimate the difficulty of unwinding them – but each of them – unfortunately -- provides space for the jihadi movements to grow and expand.

Af-Pak: In the FATA and parts of Afghanistan – there is a war raging between the forces of modernity centered in the major cities of Pakistan and Afghanistan and the radical, hyper-salafist model of the Taliban in the rural mountainous regions.

The Levant: In the Levant, the once powerful and now crumbling ISIS caliphate must be understood as a Sunni insurgency fighting against the Shia domination of both the Syrian and Iraqi governments. AQI and then ISIS mobilized this resentment and put a radical, apocalyptic sharia version of a caliphate on top of a largely sectarian movement.

Yemen: In Yemen, a decades old civil war between the north and south has been reignited – unfortunately – with an increasingly sectarian dimension and Iranian involvement – and sadly is increasingly a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Egypt: In the Egyptian Sinai, resistance by Bedouin tribes to control from Cairo has been exploited by al Qaeda affiliates – and although this is a relatively small group -- its terrorists attacks against civil aviation and hotels has ravaged the Egyptian tourist industry – and has destabilized the economy one of our most important allies.

North and West Africa: In the North African Magreb, a Taureg rebellion by the northern desert tribes against the sub-Saharan tribes in Bamako was hijacked by AQIM in 2011 – and thanks to the French intervention – and some important and timely support by the US and other allies -- we avoided another completely failed state. And in northwest Nigeria (and its bordering states), the nihilist Boko Haram is fighting a brutal war against Christianity and modern civilization.

Tunisia: And although I hate to further provide more depressing news, even where there is no conflict raging – such as in Tunisia – where there is a moderate Islamic tradition and a fledgling democracy, rule of law and economic opportunity (albeit with un-employment numbers of youth similar to Greece and Spain) – even there -- a model of what we hope other countries can aspire – Tunisia exports, on a per capita basis, *more jihadis to ISIS than any other Arab nation*. This is extremely troubling, as it defies the conventional wisdom that the jihadi threat can only be limited with political and social modernization – apparently that does not work very well either in deterring a certain number of folks from radicalizing.

The West: In Europe, and to a lesser extent the US and Canada -- there is a growing number of radicals that aspire to conduct violence – and much of that hatred is generated by social media that focuses primarily violence in the Islamic world – much of what is blamed on the west – rather than on any “social marginalization” in their adopted countries.

Narratives and Counter Narratives

The facts are clear; the radical Islamist-jihadi narrative has been a powerful motivator for thousands of young men over the past two decades.

Efforts to counter this narrative have not had lots of success over the years – many volumes have been written in universities and think tanks about how miserable our efforts have been for the past 20 years. I would offer that the problem is not necessarily the lack of an effective *counter* narrative to the jihadi violence – that often falls on deaf ears anyway. What is needed is a demonstrable *alternative* narrative – and more than just words or slogans – but a *living model of a modern state* that young Sunni men would be willing to fight for against the fanatical and murderous jihadis. And we must encourage our friends to live those models now, in their homelands.

But even with the best of counter or alternative narratives – there are too many young men resistant to this message and will be trying to kill us for many years to come. There is a high likelihood that there will continue to be “one-off” attacks in the US and Western Europe in the years ahead – but it is NOT inevitable that they reconstitute strategic capability if we respond properly to the threat.

Before recommending new actions – let me do a short review on what has worked for the past 15 years – as it is important first to recognize what has worked – before contemplating new steps.

Four Layers of Defense:

Since 9-11 we have bolstered our previously non-existent defenses – with what I describe as four overlapping layers of defense.

It starts with our policies and programs in these ten or twelve sanctuary areas of conflict – those ungoverned spaces where jihadis thrive and threaten our homeland from afar. The second layer is from those sanctuary areas to our border – and all the nations and oceans in between. The third layer of protection is at our border itself – and the fourth within our homeland.

Re: Sanctuaries:

In the principal terrorist sanctuaries we have pounded AQ’s leadership in the FATA, Yemen and Somalia with lethal action from the skies -- and from the land and sea. This model has now been expanded to ISIS targets in Iraq, Syria and Libya. Some pundits call these programs “wack-a-mole” – inferring that the terrorists quickly rebound from these strikes.

My experience in studying the behavior of these groups has been different. In those regions where we conduct these operations – not only do we kill-off the most experienced, talented and dangerous terrorists – but those that come after them are principally concerned about staying alive – and they know it is extremely dangerous for them to talk on a phone, send an email, meet with more than two or three people, travel in a car, set up a safe house or small training area. Those who do –

have a very short life expectancy – and they know it. And it is hard to run an international terrorist organization when your primary task is physical survival.

But our most important long-term instrument in these sanctuary countries is in working with the host country to assist them to control their own security problems. This requires work on the diplomatic front, intelligence sharing and perhaps most important – the training, advise and assistance missions of our military units – particularly the US Army Special Forces. As advisors, in most cases, our soldiers should not be involved in what is known as “actions on the objective” – but leave the fighting to the host country. We should trust our “Green Berets” to use good judgment – but insist that they push the host country soldiers up to the front of the battle. We are their partners – but it is their country and their war. Unilateral US action should be used only for rare and special circumstances.

Pressure on Terrorist Travel:

Since 9-11 when 19 terrorists literally strolled into our country to attack us – we have established an extremely effective network of information sharing with virtually every intelligence service in the world, at some level, some obviously much more than others. Many of most important partners have also suffered attacks from these groups and are eager to share – actually trade-- intelligence on terrorist suspects. We must keep this up; expand these intelligence relationships – providing training and assistance as well -- even with some countries that do not share our values. We can work on those shortcomings --- but in the interim we need to work with them to us safe. CIA, DIA and several DHS agencies can play a role in this regard.

Controlling the Border

At the border – our most important effort is at our airports and is directly related to the watch lists created by the intelligence sharing in the second layer of defense. But we must also be smarter at these checkpoints – and if necessary increase “secondary inspections” of suspicious people – using trained intelligence professionals to pull suspects from airport lines -- which also provides opportunities for intelligence collection and the development of assets. This can be done with respect and dignity – but must be understood as a key means of protecting our border.

In regards to an expanded wall on our southern border – from my counter-narcotics experience that should help stem the flow of drugs – and as a Cold War Army veteran I was familiar with the old Iron Curtain in Eastern Europe – and I served for several years on the DMZ in South Korea – walls do work – as they are primarily used to stem immigration flows -- and certainly can only help our counter terrorism efforts. However, right now, I am more concerned about terrorist movements in our airports and just as concerned about the Canadian border than the one to the south.

Homeland Investigations and Defense

On the domestic front, I will be brief. The FBI should be commended for keeping our nation safe. I know them well – having worked within their JTTF structure in NYC. I can assure you that in my experience, I never saw FBI agents abuse the Patriot Act or any other authorities to do anything other than look for terrorists seeking to conduct violent harm to our nation. And the same was for my detectives at NYPD, they were aggressive -- but always well within the law. They had neither the inclination nor time to waste on those that were not real threats to our immediate safety – and there were plenty of them to worry about. I firmly believe these investigations act as a deterrent as well and have helped keep the City safe for the past 15 years.

Full Court Pressure

It is vitally important that pressure be kept across all four of these layers – like full court pressure in a basketball game – please excuse my basketball analogy. Weakness in one area weakens the entire defense. And no one “layer” can hope to protect the nation by itself. It is too late to pick them up terrorists at mid court – pressure must start at the source – and be sustained all the way to the streets of our cities and towns.

But the effort must be relentless – the traps of the “full court pressure” must be continually increased and adjusted to the evolving threat. Although we can never guarantee a perfect record against small one-off attacks – these efforts are essential for keeping our nation from a strategic attack for another 15 years.

And it is now time to Ramp Up the Pressure

I will conclude with ten points in summary:

- First: On what NOT to do – try to avoid invading countries – that has not worked out too well for us in the past. But at the same time don't let nations or armies we trained fall to the enemy as occurred in Mali, Iraq and Yemen – the clean up after a collapse is much more difficult.
- Second: If we must intervene to prevent a collapse -- look at the French model in Mali – get in and get out – leave a small footprint – turn it over to the UN and local government as soon as possible. Don't try to reinvent the country – just crush the rebellion and leave a very small footprint behind.
- Third: Expand our “train, advise and assist” programs across the danger zones I discussed. Advisors should be able to move forward with their

counterparts to be effective – but actions at the objective – the actual combat operation – should be left to the host country soldiers. Occasionally, we may need to conduct unilateral direct action missions – but rarely and only when absolutely necessary.

- Fourth: Afghanistan and Iraq are important – but I caution about creeping troop increases. Thousands of advisors begin to “look and smell” like an occupation – and that creates many of the problems that you seek to solve. When I was an advisor in El Salvador – on a compound over-run by guerrillas three times in seven years – there were never more than two or three Special Forces advisors per Brigade – and for six months I was by myself. Sometimes less is more.
- Fifth: Aviation is a game changer; drones collect intelligence and target terror leadership. Attack helicopters, C-130s and A-10s are a “ground pounders” best friend in a firefight. If you want to do more in tough combat zones – expand aviation – but be careful about the footprint of ground forces. Troop increases should be in the tens – not thousands.
- Sixth: Keep your socio-political objectives and spending in these countries humble and limited. These internal problems are very complex – and even if you solve them (like in Tunisia) it does not guarantee that you will solve the jihadi export program. American support for these international programs is waning – don’t lose their support by over extending or overspending scarce resources.
- Seventh: Support our allies in the region that are on the front lines of this fight, particularly Egypt, Jordan, the UAE and others like Niger that are hosting our aircraft in Africa. They are not perfect – but they are our friends and need our support – we are fighting against the same threat – this is not charity – it is partnership. Sometimes just some political support at a crucial moment is needed.
- Eighth: Crank up the pressure on Iran. No longer accept Iranian transgressions against our soldiers or sailors. A swift and determined response should be conducted for any future transgressions. Failure to do so risks further escalation from this rogue regime.
- Ninth: Preserve our troops – their lives are precious – and there are a growing number of requirements around the world. As they continue to fight terrorist threat for another 15 years -- they are also being asked to prepare for a wide range of missions from Central Europe to East Asia.
- Finally, we are in a long war against a determined enemy. The key to success is sustained pressure, in a targeted fashion across the entire “court” – with a

policy that can be sustained perhaps for decades – to prevent strategic attacks and minimize the lone wolf attacks -- while at the same time preparing for other threats that loom on the horizon – threats that with you, Mr. Chairman, are also very familiar.

Thank you

Michael A. Sheehan is a former officer in the US Army Special Forces. He has served at the White House on the NSC staff while on active duty. He was previously Ambassador at Large for Counter Terrorism at State, Deputy Commissioner for Counter Terrorism at NYPD and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict at Defense. He is currently the Distinguished Chair of the Combating Terrorism Center at his alma mater, the United States Military Academy.