

The Future of Anti-Western Jihadism

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“Global al-Qaeda: Affiliates, Objectives, and Future Challenges”**

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Disclaimer: The views expressed in this testimony are my own and do not represent those of Stanford University, the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, or the Norwegian Government.

Introductory remarks

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, distinguished Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you very much for inviting me to testify. It is a great honour. I have been doing academic research on al-Qaida since before 9/11, and never has the future of the jihadi movement seemed more unpredictable to my eyes than now. Still, for this testimony I have decided to look ahead and speculate about the long-term future of al-Qaida. In this presentation I will highlight my three most important conclusions.

First, it is my assessment that we are past the peak of organized jihadi terrorism in the West. Al-Qaida Core is weak and most affiliates are not systematically targeting the US homeland. The main threat in the next 2-3 years is ad-hoc attacks by unaffiliated agents, which are harder to prevent, but less lethal on average. Affiliates seem to be holding their fire against the West, partly because they have local agendas for which overseas operations are not very useful, and partly because they seem to fear the US military response that comes with attacks on the homeland. Deterrence, in other words, appears to be part of the story. To maintain this deterrence vis-a-vis jihadi organizations, the US should continue to use selective military force in counterterrorism, but primarily against those groups with a proven willingness to attack the US homeland. Using heavy force against groups that have not yet attacked us runs the risk of provoking the very behaviour we are trying to prevent.

My second and more pessimistic point is that the jihadi movement writ large is thriving and will be with us for another decade at least. The optimists were basically wrong - the Arab Spring was not an "end of the Cold War moment" for jihadism. AQ core may be dying, and al-Shabaab experiencing setbacks, but other affiliates are doing just fine, and the new Ansar al-Sharia groups in North Africa are growing. The Syrian war, with its staggering numbers of foreign fighters, has been a major boost to the movement. For now, most of the groups are not targeting the West. This could change, however, and we should pay particular attention to Jabhat al-Nusra, because it disposes of so many Western operatives.

My third point, which is more of a guess, is that I expect a "second wave" of serious plots in the West some 4-6 years down the line. The most likely perpetrator will be an organization that we do not yet know about. Existing affiliates have the disadvantage of being known to us, and they are led by people who have seen what drones can do. This means they are less likely to try attacking the West, and if they do, we know where to direct the retaliation. Future groups, on the other hand, might be less visible to our agencies and led by a new generation prone to overestimating their own capabilities. Their chances of success will depend on our continued vigilance and ability to spot such grouplets early. More than ever, we need a concerted effort, both in the intelligence community and the academy, to make sense of this rapidly changing jihadi landscape.

Thank you for your attention.

The Future of Anti-Western Jihadism

This testimony explores the future of jihadism, in part because the past and present are already quite well described in the literature and partly because there has been considerable debate among experts in recent years about al-Qaida's future. Peter Bergen has literally declared the group "defeated", while a book by Daveed Gartenstein-Ross sets out to explain "why we are still losing the war on terror."¹ Earlier this year, former CIA officials Paul Pillar and Bruce Riedel published op-eds on the very same day making diametrically opposing arguments about the future of al-Qaida.² With this testimony I weigh in on this debate and deliberately engage in some qualified speculation about al-Qaida's future.

My overall view is relatively optimistic, in that I see al-Qaida Core as severely weakened, affiliates as largely uninterested in targeting the West, and the macro-trend for the jihadi movement as downward-pointing. However, I also see the decline as a long and slow one with plenty of opportunities for temporary surges in activity. In addition, I make two specific predictions: one is that conservative forms of Islamism and locally oriented varieties of jihadism will remain major forces in Middle Eastern politics for at least a decade, probably two decades, to come. The other is that, some 4-6 years down the line, we may see attempts to form new organizations emulating AQ Core's strategy of systematically targeting the West. I should note a limitation in my empirical focus: my main concern is the future of anti-Western jihadism; space does not allow for assessments of the future of every regional group or of all current trends in jihadi ideology.

From here the analysis proceeds in five steps. First I clarify key terminology; Second, I briefly describe the situation today. Third, I explain why the jihadi movement has declined. In the fourth part I present the case for a second wave of anti-Western jihadi terrorism and in the fifth I address some counterarguments.

1) Definitions

One of the reasons why people often disagree when discussing jihadism is that the prevalent concepts are so slippery that we end up talking about different things. To avoid confusion, let me clarify what I mean by the following key terms:

- *Islamism* refers to any form of political activism in the name of Islam (both violent and non-violent).
- *Jihadism* refers to any form of violent Islamism (both the locally and globally oriented varieties)
- *Anti-Western jihadism* is a subcategory of jihadism and refers to a particular strategy of prioritising Western targets. It is also known as "global jihadism" and "BinLadenism" from the man who championed it. Al-Qaida Core pursues this strategy, while the affiliates, for the most part, do not.
- *Al-Qaida* refers to al-Qaida Core and its affiliates combined.
- *Al-Qaida Core* refers to the mother organization headed by Ayman al-Zawahiri. It has been the main, but not the only perpetrator of anti-Western jihadism.
- *Affiliates* or "*regional organizations*" refer to jihadi groups such as AQAP or AQIM that have organizational links with al-Qaida Core and are sympathetic to its ideology without necessarily sharing all its aims or its strategy.

¹ Peter Bergen, "Time to declare victory: al Qaeda is defeated", *CNN.com*, 27 June 2012; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, *Bin Laden's Legacy: Why We're Still Losing the War on Terror* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2011).

² Paul R. Pillar, "Algeria Attack Represents al Qaeda's Dying Gasp", *The Daily Beast*, 24 January 2013; Bruce Riedel, "New Al-Qaeda Generation May Be Deadliest One", *Al-Monitor.com*, 24 January 2013.

- *Independents* refer to individuals and grouplets who are willing to follow al-Qaida's strategy of attacking in the West, but who lack links to a jihadi organization.
- *Foreign fighters* refer to people who travel to fight in regional jihad fronts. They are generally not prepared to follow al-Qaida's anti-Western terrorist strategy, which is why they seek out conflict zones to begin with. However, some foreign fighters radicalize in the field and end up taking part in attacks in the West.

2) The actor landscape today

Let me briefly provide a bird's eye view of the jihadi actor landscape today. First, I, like many others, see al-Qaida Core as severely weakened. Many of its leaders have been killed or detained, its membership is low (reportedly well under 100), its plot frequency and quality is down, it runs fewer training camps, and accommodates fewer foreign recruits. It is, essentially, losing personnel faster than it can recruit.

Second, the affiliates are alive and well, but most refrain from systematically attacking the West. The "older" affiliates, such as AQAP, ISI, AQIM, al-Shabaab, the Caucasus Emirate, et al, are all under various degrees of pressure, but most of them are doing just fine and show no sign of imminent collapse. The younger affiliates (such as Jabhat al-Nusra) and sympathizing organizations (such as the Ansar al-Sharia groups), seem to be doing even better.

The crucial point about the affiliates is that most of them seem either unwilling or unable to attack in the West. For all the talk of AQ connections, AQIM and ISI have staged remarkably few attacks in West. AQAP has been an exception, but after the killing of al-Awlaqi and Samir Khan in 2011, their international plotting activity – as reported in open sources – appears to be declining.

Third, despite the Boston bombings and the London stabbing this spring, the plotting activity of independents in the West appears to be declining. In the United States, for example, their activity level, measured in attempted plots, is down substantially from the record highs of 2009 and 2010.

Fourth, foreign fighting remains very popular, much more so than anti-Western terrorism. Syria is the prime destination, but other destinations such as AfPak, Mali and Yemen continue to draw a steady trickle of foreign recruits.

Fifth, conservative forms of Islamism are thriving in both the Middle East and in Europe. In Egypt, for example, Salafis constitute an important political constituency. In Saudi Arabia and much of the Gulf, conservative clergy continue to wield significant formal and informal influence. Europe has seen the emergence of several "semi-radical" organizations – such as al-Muhajiroun in the UK and the Prophet's Umma in Norway - groups that express admiration for al-Qaida but mostly stop short of perpetrating violence in the West.

The bottom line is that the Arab Spring appears not to have the same effect on Islamism as the fall of the Soviet Union had on radical leftism. The overall situation today is reminiscent of – though not identical to – that of the 1990s, when, like now, several jihadi groups with local and regional agendas were operating in across the Muslim world. Then as now, Western governments were unable or unwilling to pursue them militarily, and the groups themselves were unable or unwilling to attack in the West. Then as now, Europe had semi-radical communities operating just within the confines of the law and regularly sending foreign fighters to conflicts in the Muslim world.

The main difference is that in the 1990s, al-Qaida Core did not have the notoriety as it has today, and its strategy of targeting the West was largely untested. There were occasional episodes of anti-Western terrorist activity, but for most groups, systematically targeting the West was inconceivable, which is why Bin Ladin's initiative attracted so much controversy from other activists at the time. Today, AQ Core's "America first" strategy is very much on the table, and the rhetoric of all groups is

substantially more anti-Western. This means that “going global” represents a shorter ideological leap for jihadis today than for their predecessors in the 1990s.

3) Why AQ Core is weak and affiliates hold back

The decline of al-Qaida Core is the easiest aspect of the current state of affairs to explain. It is fundamentally a story of what terrorism scholars call government “learning”, i.e., gradual accumulation of information about the identity and location of the members of the rebel group, which in turn allows for increasingly targeted and more effective repressive measures. At the beginning of the war on terror, al-Qaida enjoyed an informational advantage over the US government – as do all terrorist groups at the outset of their campaigns – because it knew where to find us but we did not know where to find them. With the help of time and massive investments in intelligence, we were able to map the organization, contain it, and eliminate leaders faster than it could train new ones.

Learning is also behind the moderate decline in attacks by independents. Advances in data mining and analysis have allowed governments to collect, accumulate, and exploit data about the fringes of the jihadi network to a much greater extent than before, allowing for the identification of many, though not all, plots before they reach execution. Governments are helped here by the fact that true lone wolves are extremely rare, and that, for most individuals, the radicalization process involves socialization with other activists and/or consumption of jihadi propaganda online, both of which leave traces to be exploited. This, incidentally, is one of several reasons why the Internet is proving to be less of a boon to terrorists than many analysts predicted some years ago. For all their skill using the internet for propaganda distribution, jihadists are struggling use the web for operational purposes; they are having particular problems avoiding surveillance and establishing trust between one another online.

The more contentious question is why the affiliates are not attacking in the West more often. One argument holds that this is a capability issue, i.e., that the groups are not operationally capable of circumventing the many countermeasures and detection systems that Western governments have put in place since 9/11. This argument is unconvincing for two main reasons. One is that several affiliates, especially AQIM and al-Shabaab, do have economic resources and human assets that should arguably enable them to carry out at least some attacks in the West. The other reason is if capability was the main problem, we should still expect to see more *attempts*. The combination of high intent and low capability is observable in the form of failed and foiled attacks. The fact that we do not see many such attempts, except from AQAP, suggests most affiliates are not really trying.

I argue that the relatively low supply of anti-Western plots from the affiliates reflects low motivation, which in turn has two origins: a preference for local targets and fear of US retaliation. For all their anti-Western rhetoric and declared allegiance to al-Qaida Core, many affiliates appear to place greater emphasis on achieving local political objectives than inflicting harm on the West. We can infer this preference from the content of group declarations. Some groups say explicitly that they do not plan to attack in the West; others are more ambiguous in their statements, but reveal their preferences by devoting more attention to local topics than to global ones or describing close enemies with more vitriol than distant ones. Groups also reveal their preferences by the way they allocate operational resources. Most affiliates devote their resources overwhelmingly to local or

regional operations. Even those organizations that have attempted operations against the West have conducted a much larger number of operations in the local theatre. This is in stark contrast to AQ core, which devoted nearly all of its resources after 2001 to attacks in the West. By far the most plausible explanation for these allocations is that groups value local political gains higher than international ones. If your aim is to establish control over a given territory and you are caught up in a fight with a regional enemy, it makes little strategic sense to attack the West. However, you might have an incentive to launch *verbal* attacks on the West, because this makes you appear strong and principled in your local setting.

Attacking the West makes even less strategic sense for such groups given the cost to the organization of provoking the ire of the American military. There is solid evidence from captured documentation that leaders of jihadi organizations think strategically and make decisions based on an informed calculus of costs and benefits. Leaders are, as a rule, not suicidal or irrational. There is also extensive evidence – from internal strategy documents – that leaders are aware of the capabilities of the US military and seek to avoid unnecessary exposure to these capabilities. In the 1990s, some jihadi leaders explicitly admitted fearing US retaliation and cited it as a reason not to pursue Osama bin Ladin’s “America first” strategy. Such explicit admissions are rare today, but it would be surprising if the prospect of retaliation did not factor into the decision calculus in an era where the US has proven much more willing to use force against terrorists than perhaps ever before in modern history. Most likely, affiliate leaders understand that targeting the US homeland might bring their own demise.

4) Reasons to expect a “second wave”

Given that AQ core is weak, that the affiliates seem largely deterred, and that independents are too loosely organized to sustain terrorist campaigns, it is my assessment that the prospect of a wave of large-scale jihadi plots in the US is unlikely in the short term. What we will see instead is a steady trickle of ad-hoc attacks, some of which may be large in scale, but *on average* they will be less lethal than plots directed by organizations.

In the longer term, however – 4-6 years down the line, I believe we may well see attempts to mount one or more new organizations that will adopt Bin Ladin’s “America first” strategy in an attempt to finish what he started. It is important to underline that this effort will probably have to be organized and relatively centralized for the attacks to be of strategic significance. I expect something coordinated, along the lines of AQAP’s Awlaki/Khan cell in Yemen in 2009-11, but on a somewhat larger scale. Such an initiative could emerge within a faction of an existing organization, as was the case of the Awlaki/Khan cell, or it could occur as a result of a dynamic of competition (for outside funds and recruits) between grouplets in an area with many actors, such as Afghanistan/Pakistan. My guess would also be that such an initiative would benefit from logistical support from some of the semi-radical communities in Europe, as did the first al-Qaida.

I see six reasons why such a scenario might materialize. The first is the historical precedent - many terrorist campaigns follow a pattern whereby there is an early spike in activity (a product of the above mentioned informational advantage) followed by decline, followed by a second, lower peak, as the group or movement tries, usually unsuccessfully, to turn the ship around.

The second reason is that the jihadi movement is very conscious of its own history and keen to avenge past defeats. This may make a new generation of militants want to emulate the original al-Qaida and finish what Bin Laden started.

The third reason is that there will be arenas for at least one new generation of jihadis to socialize, train and get indoctrinated in the years ahead. As mentioned, the regional affiliates will continue to exist for the foreseeable future. The future founders of the second al-Qaida are likely to emerge from the lower ranks of existing organizations. The semi-radical communities of Europe are also likely to survive for several more years, especially considering the number of Europeans in Syria and the coming release from prison of many icons of Western jihadism imprisoned in the early 2000s.

The fourth reason is that there will still be grievances to provide resonance to the AQ narrative. Anti-Americanism runs very deep in the region, and there are many possible events – from small symbolic ones to real military interventions – that may bring a resurgence of anti-Western attitudes in the region. Moreover, several of the old conflicts highlighted by al-Qaida as symbols of Muslim suffering, such as Palestine, Chechnya, and Kashmir, will persist. In addition, in some Arab countries, the high expectations that accompanied the Arab spring may be dashed by continued malgovernance.

The fifth reason is that the ability of Western and Middle Eastern intelligence agencies to monitor jihadi groups may decline in the years ahead. This can happen as a result of reduced funding; many countries are having to cut public spending, and large counterterrorism apparatuses may not be sustainable during lulls in terrorist activity. Another way is through normative or legal restraints. In many Western countries, drone strikes and extrajudicial killings are politically controversial, and some agencies may see their hands partly tied as a result. Another possible mechanism is complacency: if relatively little happens in terms of plots against the homeland, vigilance may decrease. Finally, agencies may be distracted by other, more pressing issues; this is a particularly real risk for partner agencies in Middle Eastern countries experiencing unrest.

Sixth, we may see unexpected technological advances, for example in digital stealth technology, that empower groups seeking to operate transnationally. As alluded to earlier, governments today seem to have the upper hand on the Internet; because they can often track, view, and store the communications of terrorists. This may change if there is a quantum leap in encryption, for example, that allows terrorists to avoid detection for some time.

5) Reasons not to expect a “second wave”

I see five main objections to the prediction of a second wave of organized anti-Western jihadism. One consists of saying that the deterrent described above is likely to last, so that no rational actor will dare to launch a campaign on the homeland in the foreseeable future. While I believe this to be true in the short run, I am much less sure about the long run. Even if *most* groups are deterred, there can always be outliers willing to take high risk, for example because poor information make them overestimate the chances of success, or because they value the short term status benefits that come with militancy. It is generally hard to predict the emergence and characteristics of new radical actors, especially small terrorist groups. The social sciences have much to say about group behavior once the group is established and we know its preferences. We know much less about why groups emerge and how preferences are shaped. It is hard to categorically dismiss the possibility that a new

group, led by younger, more optimistic activists, may emerge and attempt to wage a terrorism campaign against the US.

A second objection would consist of arguing that there has been a permanent normative backlash against anti-Western terrorism that will prevent the new Bin Ladin from attracting followers. There is some truth to this. There is measurably less popular support for al-Qaida, terrorism and suicide bombings among Muslims today than ten years ago. Also, there has been a lot of criticism of al-Qaida's anti-Western strategy from within the jihadi movement. However, the normative backlash has not been pervasive by any means. There are still many activists who consider attacks in the West legitimate. Moreover, it would not take many people to wage a campaign of the kind envisaged here. Even though the mean level of support is declining, there is still ardent support at the margins.

The third and perhaps strongest objection is that our knowledge of the jihadi movement and our coercive capabilities are so great that any such initiative will be nipped in the bud; New Bin Ladins will essentially be spotted early and liquidated. This is why I expect such an initiative, if successful, will most likely emerge from the understudied fringe of an existing network. Moreover, I expect the leaders of the "next al-Qaida" to proceed more discreetly than Bin Ladin did when he announced his jihad against the United States in the 1996.

Conclusion

The bottom line of my assessment is that we are past the peak of organized jihadi activity in the West, but we will see a steady trickle of minor attacks and we may see second wave some 4-6 years down the line. This prediction is of course little more than an educated guess, and it is vulnerable to unexpected political developments, of which we have seen more than a fair share over the past couple of years. For example, Western countries could get drawn into the Syrian conflict for reasons other than counterterrorism, which would substantially increase the terrorist threat against those countries from both Sunni and Shiite militants.

My main policy recommendation is for the US government to continue a differentiated approach to jihadism, according to which the hardest measures are reserved for those groups with a proven intention to systematically target the US or European homeland. A strategy that uses heavy force against actors without such intentions risks provoking the very anti-Western militancy we are trying to curtail.