

The Honorable Jane Harman
Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee
on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade
April 8, 2014

I flew in from Boston today—mindful that the anniversary of the Boston Marathon bombing is next week. At a time of honor, Boston was resilient and remains strong—and the damage was contained. Our country has changed and matured since 9/11.

Last week, Ayman al-Zawahiri—the leader of al Qaeda—released an audio message about the death of Abu Khalid al-Suri, who was Zawahiri's representative in Syria.

Al-Suri was also a founding member and senior leader in Ahrar al-Sham, a militant group in the Islamic Front, a coalition of several rebel groups.

Al-Suri was killed in February by two suicide bombers in Aleppo.

In the audio tape, Zawahiri recalled knowing al-Suri since the conflict against Soviet Union forces in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and he called for Islamist fighters to reject the infighting in Syria.

Zawahiri said, “Everyone who has fallen into these sins must remember that they accomplish for the enemies of Islam what they could not accomplish by their own abilities.”

Evolution of the Threat

Why does this matter? Because now—more than any other time since 9/11—it is extremely hard to differentiate terror groups from your average band of militants, or to understand their varied missions and “strategies.”

No longer is it just good guys and bad guys. It's terrorist-on-terrorist.

It's bad guy versus bad guy, complicated further by misguided and dangerous transfers of guns and money to groups like ISIS, which even Al Qaeda has denounced.

In a perverse twist, thirteen years after the US entered Afghanistan—a country with little governance that served as a safehaven for al Qaeda to plan the 9/11 attacks—we may be seeing its sequel in Syria.

And after years of tepid steps, our options to influence the situation are limited.

Some predict that the only way America will engage directly in the Syria conflict is if there is a counterterrorism mission following an attack.

The good news is that it's highly unlikely that the US will suffer a catastrophic terror attack on the scale of 9/11 again, based on the security improvements put in place since then. But the risk of lower-tech and lone-wolf attacks remains.

Understanding the field of play

As the threat continues to evolve, the US must continue to reevaluate its strategy to counter terrorism and consider answers to the following questions.

1. ***How has the threat evolved over time?*** We all know that what once was a highly centralized structure—core al Qaeda leadership—has been decimated. But, rather than disappear, it has morphed into a decentralized horizontal organization—composed mainly of so-called “affiliates.”
2. ***Are we giving al Qaeda too much credit?*** There are affiliates and connected groups, but they are opportunistic and don't always share the same goals – and aren't always welcomed by al Qaeda. The latest Zawahiri audio tape is case in point.
3. ***How will the long-term consequences of a war-torn and destabilized Syria impact our strategy?*** As Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson said recently at the Wilson Center, Syria is now a “homeland security problem.” A major part of our effort must be to use a whole of government approach—including aid and development efforts, rather than just kinetic tools, to deal with refugees, stagnant economies, and challenged leaders. Forty-one percent of Syrians have been displaced—150,000 dead—and millions are squatting outside the country in neighboring states like Jordan.
4. ***What's our narrative?*** As mentioned, next week marks the anniversary of the Boston bombing. The Tsarnaev brothers—at least Tamerlan—were radicalized in part on the internet. We need to win the argument with the next kid who is trying to decide whether or not to plant a pressure-cooker bomb or strap on a suicide vest.

Many think the US stands for drones, Gitmo, gun violence, and spying. What do we really stand for? The rule of law, tolerance, economic opportunity—generosity to our neighbors and to those in foreign lands plagued by natural disasters. But we aren't making the sale.

The Middle East Research Institute found that since Inspire magazine's launch in 2010, “over 20 young people have been arrested on terrorism-connected charges with copies of Inspire in their possession.” There may be many more we don't know about.

Ending the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq should help, but we must also stop using the Authorization for the Use of Military Force as the legal bedrock for a grab-bag of CT operations around the world. Closing Gitmo must happen and we still haven't fully explained the legal framework for our surveillance efforts.

Conclusion

Sadly, as one European colleague said recently, we have changed the culture of “need-to-know” to “need-to-share.” But the new paradigm is “need-to-blame.” As I have often said, the terrorists won’t check our party registration before they blow us up. On the anniversary of Boston, let’s unite to tell the right story about America.