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Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan: An Enduring Threat

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Chairman Poe and Ranking Member Sherman, and Members of the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade of the House of Representatives' Committee on Foreign Affairs, thank you for holding this hearing today on a subject of vital national importance for the safety and security of the American people - the future threat to our country from Al-Qaeda and its affiliates in Afghanistan and Pakistan as we and our NATO allies draw down our forces in Afghanistan in 2014.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the many Americans, military and civilian, who have served our country in Afghanistan and Pakistan over the twelve-plus years since our country was attacked on September 11, 2001. Most importantly, I want to pay tribute to the over 2,000 Americans who have made the ultimate sacrifice for their country in this conflict and the nearly 20,000 who have been wounded. Their commitment to defending us is a debt we must honor, but can never fully repay. I also want to express my respect and admiration for the family members of the hundreds of thousands who have served our country in this conflict. Their sacrifices, often little recognized and poorly understood, are the foundation that makes possible the extraordinary efforts on the ground in Afghanistan and Pakistan that have made our country safer over the years since 9/11. At the same time, I want to stress my admiration for the efforts and sacrifices on the part of our Allies and partners and, very importantly, I honor the people and security forces of Afghanistan and Pakistan who have suffered and continue to suffer in such large numbers from the attacks of terrorists and their supporters.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member and Members of the Committee I would also like to thank you and your colleagues in the Congress for your support for our troops and civilians in Afghanistan and Pakistan and for your attention to the needs of their families. I thank you for your commitment to the security of our nation through providing the resources for our efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan and, through hearings such as this, for your attention to and oversight of the strategies and policies that determine the success or failure of these efforts.

In response to the request from the Subcommittee to "discuss the threat to stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan from Al-Qaeda and their affiliates, and describe likely future security challenges given the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan over the course of 2014," I will focus on three areas. First, I will examine where we stand in Afghanistan regarding the present and future threat from Al-Qaeda and its affiliates; second, I will look at Pakistan from the same perspectives; and finally I will make recommendations on courses of action that I believe will make the United States, our Allies and partners, and Afghanistan and Pakistan more secure and better able to deal with the Al Qaida threat.

However, I will begin with a look at the overall strategic threat that Al-Qaeda and other terrorists groups pose and present a view that differs from what I would call “tactical analysis” of Al-Qaeda.

Much recent commentary, both from U.S. officials² and in the media, describes a “core Al-Qaeda” that is somewhere on a spectrum from “on the road to defeat” to “degraded.” These analyses generally rely on evidence such as, the number of Al-Qaeda leaders who have been killed, the number of Al-Qaeda fighters in one place or another, the amount of Al-Qaeda funds, whether other terrorist organizations “formally” recognize Al-Qaeda’s leadership, if Al-Qaeda’s directives are followed by other terrorists, the ability of Al-Qaeda to direct specific operations, or other, similar, tactical indicators. Such analyses then take these tactical indicators as evidence that Al-Qaeda is less capable of immediate, coordinated actions and then draw broader conclusions that Al-Qaeda is less of a threat. These analyses³ then claim that because Al-Qaeda is now more decentralized, has many regional franchises, and depends more on individuals than on centrally directed operations, it is less of a threat.

But, a focus on the tactical risks misses the bigger, strategic picture and risks following policies that may not be effective. When the State Department’s annual report on terrorism,⁴ released in April, shows an increase from 2012 to 2013 of 43% in worldwide terrorists attacks, it is important to ask whether policy views of Al Qaida as a spent or terminally weakened force are accurate.

It is clear that Al-Qaeda is evolving.⁵ However, it is likely that such evolution is making Al Qaida more, not less, of a threat. Therefore, it is important to ask both what this evolution means for the future and what policies we should adopt to reflect this changing landscape.

My view is that Al-Qaeda, despite our tactical counterterrorism successes, continues to be a major strategic threat to the United States and its allies. Tomorrow, Al-Qaeda will be an even greater threat because of its ongoing evolutions. Today, we see Al-Qaeda not only maintaining a core in Pakistan, but also continuing to push forward in Syria, Yemen, Somalia and elsewhere in Africa. Al-Qaeda still maintains its core ideology of an Islamic religious and governing structure that does not permit any others

² U.S. State Department Press Briefing, April 30, 2014

³ See for example, the U.S. State Department Country Reports on Terrorism, April 2014; <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/225050.pdf>, and discussion thereof, *ibid*.

⁴ *ibid*.

⁵ See, e.g. the analysis in Seth G. Jones, “Counterterrorism and the Role of Special Operations Forces” Testimony Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Terrorism, Non-Proliferation, and Trade, April 8, 2014, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/CT400/CT408/RAND_CT408.pdf#page4

to exist, continues its core goal of a caliphate that governs peoples over a vast area (people that in fact reject Al Qaida), and holds to a core belief that the West, particularly the United States, is inimical by its very existence to Al-Qaeda.

I see no change in Al-Qaeda's self-narrative that its success is inevitable if it continues its struggle. Failures along the way do not undercut that Al Qaida narrative, in fact, they see temporary setbacks as challenges that, once overcome, validate the destiny that this narrative claims. A key part of the Al-Qaeda narrative is the conviction that its core beliefs formed the basis of the defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s. That same conviction is the bedrock for the coming (in their view) defeat of the United States and NATO in Afghanistan. Increasing Taliban success in Afghanistan, leading to an eventual Taliban takeover would be a major strategic victory for Al-Qaeda and its ideology. An eventual Taliban and Al-Qaeda success in Afghanistan would more than negate all the tactical U.S. counterterrorism successes of recent years and produce a world much less safe for Americans.

There is no timeline for Al-Qaeda in its quests, unlike for many here in Washington. We often see our endeavors through the lens of timelines. We too often measure success or failure of national endeavors, no matter how complex, through whether deadlines are met, rather than whether objectives are achieved. There is a real danger that we may allow a focus on the tactical to lead to strategic error. A determination to hold to deadlines, rather than being adaptive and flexible, could well lead us into strategic errors that damage greatly our long-term national security.

Seizing Success in Afghanistan

Mr. Chairman, we have had major successes in Afghanistan, a fact poorly understood by most in the general public and actively denied by many, primarily those invested in a narrative of American failure. Our goal, since September 11, 2001 and over two administrations, has been to defeat Al Qaida and ensure that Afghanistan is never again a safe haven from which terrorists threaten Afghanistan, the region or the world. Despite huge obstacles and many bad policy choices on our part, we are on the way to achieving this goal in Afghanistan. And if we make the serious, sustained commitment that the threat to our country demands, we can not only achieve this goal, but also sustain it. The successes we are having and can continue to have validate the sacrifices that so many have made and must be a matter of pride to those who have served in Afghanistan and for all Americans.

Why do I say something that directly contradicts the belief, according to USA TODAY, of 52% of Americans that the U.S. has failed to achieve its goals in Afghanistan⁶ and the report from CNN that of 82% of Americans oppose the war in Afghanistan⁷?

⁶ USA TODAY/Pew Research Center Poll; USA TODAY, 1/31/2014

⁷ CNN/ORC International survey; CNN, 12.30/2013

Quite simply, the facts prove success. Here are the facts:

- Al-Qaeda is no longer active in Afghanistan, except for a small group in remote eastern Afghanistan that poses no threat to the U.S.⁸
- Afghan Security Forces, which took the lead for security in Afghanistan last year have the capability, if they receive necessary continued support from the U.S. and the international community, to keep Afghanistan secure from a Taliban takeover and a return of Al-Qaeda.⁹
- Afghanistan has made major progress in development indicators such as increased life expectancy, improved health and education services, and media freedom,¹⁰ key areas that underpin the long-term survivability of an Afghan state that will reject Al-Qaeda. (Note: this progress has occurred despite the opposition to “nation building” by successive US administrations.)
- The Afghan people demonstrated their support for a future that is democratic and free and rejects the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in the elections of April 5, where over 60% of Afghans, twice as many as in previous elections turned out, despite Taliban threats to prevent the elections and despite serious attacks by the Taliban on the elections process.

This is not to say that Afghanistan does not have serious problems and vexing challenges. Corruption, narcotics trafficking and addiction, a fragile, aid-dependent economy, weak rule of law, are among many problems that Afghanistan, like other poor, conflict ridden states faces. One only has to follow the failure-centric international media to get a full dose of the negative. But, the real story, one that is hardly ever reported by the media, is the great achievements of the Afghan people over the past 12 years and the fact that this positive trajectory continues. The United Nations reports that over the past decade, Afghanistan has made more progress as a society than any other place in the world.¹¹ This progress in so many areas is basis for a sustainable victory over Al-Qaeda and its narrative that the best fate for Afghanistan is a return to the rule of the Taliban.

⁸ CNS Study, “Independent Assessment of the Afghan National Security Forces”, <http://www.cna.org/sites/default/files/research/CNA%20Independent%20Assessment%20of%20the%20ANSF.pdf>

⁹ Ibid, and International Crisis Group Report, “Afghanistan’s Insurgency After the Transition,” May 12, 2014, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/256-afghanistan-s-insurgency-after-the-transition.pdf>

¹⁰ USAID Fact Sheet. <http://www.usaid.gov/news-information/fact-sheets/usaid-engagement-afghanistan-2014-and-beyond>, and, Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index 2013, http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2013_1054.html

¹¹ <http://oversight.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Sampler.pdf>

The people of Afghanistan recognize the progress they have made and want more. Almost 60% of Afghans believe their country is headed in the right direction,¹² a figure far higher than most countries in the region or the world, and they have high hopes for the future. Afghans also give high positives to their army and police.¹³ After the April elections, some Afghans even demonstrated in favor of their security forces, thanking them for protecting the polls¹⁴. These sentiments are a direct rebuttal of the Al-Qaeda narrative.

Perhaps most challenging to the Al-Qaeda narrative in Afghanistan is Afghanistan's free media, a media that is the object of Taliban attacks. From a time when television was non-existent and radio tightly controlled, Afghanistan's media today is full of political talk shows, soap operas, anti-crime dramas and even music. All areas that the Taliban detests and which would disappear under a Taliban return.

Is an Al-Qaeda return possible? It certainly is in the Al-Qaeda narrative, which has a victory in Afghanistan over the U.S. and the West as a key element. The Al-Qaeda leadership, while under pressure in Pakistan remains viable, but constricted. A return to Afghanistan would free Al-Qaeda of such constraints, giving it the space to re-open training camps and return to the coordinated, large-scale attacks that so damaged the U.S. and our allies in the past. Even more importantly, an Al-Qaeda return to Afghanistan would strengthen its narrative of inevitable victory, impel recruits to flock to its banner and lead to destabilization of other countries in the region and beyond.

Some question whether Taliban resurgence would include the return of Al-Qaeda to Afghanistan after a peace deal. A recent poll asked Afghans whether they thought the Taliban would respect any peace deal. Afghan doubt the Taliban would respect any such deal – in fact in a recent poll four times more Afghans thought the Taliban would not respect such a deal as thought they would (49% to 11%).¹⁵

We have the opportunity now, in Afghanistan, to deal the Taliban an even stronger blow than the death of Osama bin Laden. That blow would be the emergence of Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda's former base and the location of its earliest successes, as an independent, successful, progressive Islamic democracy, a full

¹² The Asia Foundation poll.

<http://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/2013AfghanSurvey.pdf>

¹³ *ibid*

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<http://www.afghanistannewscenter.com/news/2014/february/feb272014.html#a8>

¹⁵ ATR Consulting Poll, p.6: <http://atr-consulting.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Perception-Survey-Report-Final.pdf>

member of the community of nations and a country able to defend itself. We need to seize the success we have achieved, continue to help Afghanistan deal with the many serious long-term problems it faces, and help Afghanistan be a model, like South Korea, of a country that faced near extinction from outside forces, but through the determination of its people and outside assistance becomes the antithesis of the forces that almost destroyed it. This is not a process that will take just a few years; it will take a continuing, serious, very long-term commitment. But, the dangers we face without such a commitment merit our taking on this task.

Cautious Pragmatism on Pakistan

Pakistan faces perhaps even more challenges than Afghanistan. In addition to a multi-faceted insurgency that has killed over 5000 Pakistani security forces and over 30,000 Pakistani civilians over the past decade¹⁶, Pakistan faces massive economic and social challenges.

Pakistan is where the Al Qaida leadership has resided since being evicted from Afghanistan in 2001. Pakistan's leaders denied for years that Al-Qaeda's leadership was in Pakistan, claiming that Al-Qaeda's leaders, if they were anywhere, were in Afghanistan.¹⁷ Following the operation that killed Osama Bin Laden, and the public revelations about the length of time and locations in Pakistan where Bin Laden lived, the U.S. government urged Pakistani authorities to take action against the remaining Al-Qaeda leadership. However, most media reports of actions against Al-Qaeda leaders since 2012 have attributed those actions to outside powers.

Al-Qaeda's current leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, apparently continues to reside in Pakistan (despite Pakistani denials¹⁸) from where he is currently carrying on a dispute with the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sabah (ISIS) over the extent of Al-Qaeda's leadership in the global jihadist struggle.¹⁹ Unfortunately, it appears that as long as there are areas of Pakistan that the Pakistani government does not fully control, such Al Qaida activism will continue.

As U.S. and NATO troops draw down in Afghanistan, the Taliban are expanding their military actions in Afghanistan²⁰. While the Taliban lack the ability to threaten the survival of the Afghan state and Afghan forces are likely to be able to repulse Taliban

¹⁶ <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/database/casualties.htm>

¹⁷ Interview, John Stewart-President Pervez Musharraf; Sept. 6, 2006, <http://thedailyshow.cc.com/videos/9078tw/pervez-musharraf-pt--1>

¹⁸ <http://www.ndtv.com/article/world/hina-rabbani-khar-denies-hillary-clinton-s-claim-that-zawahiri-is-in-pakistan-207586>

¹⁹ CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/03/world/meast/ayman-al-zawahiri-message-syria/>

²⁰ ICG report, opcit.

efforts to seize any important ground in Afghanistan, it is clear that the fact that the Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan are vital to the Taliban's ability to carry out this increased pace of attacks.

Pakistan, facing its own insurgency, as well as dealing with a perceived threat from India is in a difficult position vis-à-vis the Afghan Taliban. If Pakistan were to attempt to take action against the Afghan Taliban it would risk adding another violent actor to its internal threats. Additionally, Pakistan appears to have some interest in maintaining existing links to the Taliban as a hedge against the U.S. and NATO leaving Afghanistan. In the case of a withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces, Pakistan would likely fear increased Indian activity in Afghanistan. These fears about India likely provide additional incentives for Pakistan to use the Taliban as a hedge.

At the same time, it is clear that Al Qaida, which like Pakistan, sees advantages from Taliban activism, seeks a Pakistan that adopts Al-Qaeda's ideology and preferred "caliphate" style of governance. Al Qaida has been connected in some media reports to efforts to attack Pakistani security forces. That might lead one to conclude that Pakistan should see Al-Qaeda as an existential threat. However, the situation is more complicated than that. Al Qaida has also been linked with some terrorist groups that in the past have been seen as linked to Pakistani security forces, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba. The Taliban share an interest with these groups in actions against India, particularly related to Kashmir.

It is beyond the scope of this testimony to explore in depth the many interconnections among these groups and the competing motivations that exist among the various groups and within the Pakistani government, which still faces severe civilian-military tensions, continues to experience both sectarian violence and acts such as successful (and attempted) assassinations of journalists that undercut the fabric of civil society. However, with regard to Al-Qaeda, it does appear that it should be in Pakistan's interests to take steps to remove Al-Qaeda leadership and support structures in order to reduce the overall threat level that Pakistan faces. But, in the end it is the state and people of Pakistan that must make that decision for themselves. Of course, that decision will have a major impact on the level and kind of threat that Al-Qaeda poses to the United States.

Policy recommendations:

Afghanistan: Given the importance that Al-Qaeda places on victory in Afghanistan and the advantages Al Qaida would achieve from a Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan, the United States should immediately make clear that it intends to retain a sufficient level of military forces to provide effective training, advising, and assisting Afghan forces, including key enablers such as air support, intelligence support, and logistical support. A public affirmation that the U.S. will not abandon Afghanistan, but rather will invest in a long-term relationship that includes both sufficient military and civilian assistance will provide certainty to actors from Pakistan and the Taliban to Al-Qaeda itself that Afghanistan will continue its positive evolution.

Pakistan: For Pakistan as well, a clear U.S. and NATO commitment to Afghanistan's future will help that countries leaders make choices that will both improve their own security and the safety of the U.S. and our allies and partners. Such a commitment would make more likely Pakistani action against the Taliban. Once Pakistan sees that the Taliban do not have a reasonable chance of succeeding militarily in Afghanistan, Pakistan will have a reduced interest in using the Taliban as a hedge against future install instability. An additional recommendation would be for the U.S. to seek to work with India to reduce Pakistani fears about the direction Afghanistan will take after 2014. With a sure commitment from the U.S. and NATO, Pakistan may see less of a threat from Indian policies in Afghanistan.