

Testimony for the Record

**The Honorable Michael A. Sheehan
For the House Foreign Affairs Committee
May 19, 2014**

Sustaining Our Success Against al Qaeda Central

President Obama will deliver a major foreign policy address at the U.S. Military Academy's graduation at West Point on May 28th and I am sure he will address the war in Afghanistan with the cadets. It is unlikely he will make an announcement on the final size of our forces post 2014, but when that decision is made, I hope that he will leave enough capability to sustain the success we have had against al Qaeda Central in protecting our homeland and other strategic targets since September 11, 2001.

Currently, the US military and the CIA continue to withdraw from remote areas of Afghanistan and are consolidating in a smaller number of bases. President Obama has promised that American combat action will end at the end of 2014, and the war is being completely turned over to the Afghan government.

The American people are tired of 13 years of war since 9/11 and the Afghan people are tired of the US military rumbling around their country in combat action. The news flowing from the region is consistently negative: the Taliban is gaining ground all the time, the Pakistani government continues to exacerbate the situation by harboring enemy groups, and the Afghan government is hopelessly corrupt. It is hard to remain optimistic in light of these constant reports. There will a great temptation for the Administration to go to the "zero option" and withdraw all our troops by the end of the President's second term. In my view, this would be a major error and jeopardize our security from future al Qaeda attacks from this region.

As we contemplate our future in Afghanistan, it is important to maintain a proper perspective and a degree of optimism. For the US government, our military and intelligence efforts in Afghanistan and eastern Pakistan have been an *unmitigated success in terms of the single most important metric: preventing al Qaeda from attacking our homeland*. This was incomprehensible in September 2001 when our television networks were flooded with instant terrorism experts predicting dire scenarios of future al Qaeda attacks.

And although some exaggerated the future of the al Qaeda threat, it is real and significant. Prior to 2001, when al Qaeda was under no pressure, they conducted three strategic attacks in three years: the African embassy bombings in August of 1998, the attack against the USS Cole in October of 2000, and the attacks of September 11, 2001. No other terrorist organization has such a record, especially with such a shocking and devastating attack in our homeland. But, al Qaeda has been under relentless pressure since we invaded Afghanistan in November of 2001,

and has been unable to attack our homeland or core assets since. The lesson is clear: if “al Qaeda Central” is left alone they can organize strategic attacks with regularity. Under pressure, they cannot.

The so-called “Af-Pak” border region is the historic center of the most deadly attacks against the U.S. Currently, al Qaeda leadership is predominantly in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of western Pakistan. They remain the leaders of the global jihadi movement and are surrounded by militant organizations and individuals looking to be part of an operation against the U.S. homeland. It is a unique “stew” of foreign fighters, wannabe terrorists and violent jihadi groups with a variety of enemies including India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the United States. If we take the pressure off this traditional safe-haven, they will reconstitute the training camps, safe houses and other networks that enabled their operations prior to 9/11. We have successfully pounded this area with hell fire missiles in the past ten years, denying the jihadi leaders the ability to organize sophisticated attacks. And we have been able to keep al Qaeda in check in Pakistan without U.S. ground forces in their country. In Afghanistan, our Special Operations Forces have crushed al Qaeda elements that have tried to reconstitute safe haven back across the Afghan border. This is an enormous success story.

But the threat remains active. We should remember Faisal Fazad, the Times Square bomber from Connecticut. He was able to travel to western Pakistan multiple times to get training and indoctrination and was not suspected by our Homeland Security apparatus. Fortunately, his training was poor and his bomb fizzled out on Broadway. This was not luck, in my view, but a direct result of our relentless pressure on al Qaeda in the FATA. But our efforts do not guarantee there will be no attacks. The Boston bombing and the Fort Hood shooting by Major Hassan reminds us that the “lone wolf” terrorist can attack our homeland. But these attacks, although tragic for the victims and their families, do not constitute a strategic threat to the United States. “Boston Strong” showed the resiliency of the American people to such attacks.

A U.S. presence in Afghanistan is essential to continue the successful pressure on the terrorists in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. There is no viable way to reach the terrorist bases in Pakistan other than from Afghanistan. The Taliban, who continue to provide sanctuary to al Qaeda, must be prevented from re-taking control of Afghanistan. In determining our future presence in Afghanistan, we must not fall victim to unwarranted pessimism. The Taliban are not ten feet tall. They are a tough, resilient group that enjoys an external sanctuary in Pakistan, a major advantage for their insurgency. As such, the Taliban will be able to conduct periodic terrorist attacks in Kabul and control some remote parts of the country over the next many years. However, its prospects for regaining control of Afghanistan are dim. If the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, reappeared to lead a major Taliban offensive like he did in 1995, he would be killed within days. The conditions of the 1990s that enabled the Taliban to take power no longer exist, especially in terms of the security equation.

Today, the Afghan Army is a much more formidable institution, consisting of over 300,000 troops. Within this force are some very serious fighters. For example, 14,000 Afghan special operations forces were trained by some of our most outstanding Special Forces warriors and have developed into a credible and multi-ethnic fighting force. Over 20,000 local police militias have formed to fight the Taliban at the grass roots. And air power, including the future delivery of 30 MI-17 helicopters to the Afghan Air Force, will be a game changer.

With a reduced American presence, our future mission in Afghanistan must be *extremely narrow*, consisting of two objectives: 1) preventing the collapse of the Kabul government and 2) maintaining pressure on terrorist groups on both sides of the Af-Pak border. All other worthy objectives in Afghanistan regarding democracy, economic development, and social justice are a bonus. Our pessimism, to some extent, is of our own making -- in that we continuously raised the bar of success from defeating al Qaeda to transforming Afghanistan into a modern state.

Pentagon and CIA officials informally have agreed with White House staff that they can accomplish this mission with a force of some 10,000 U.S. troops post 2014. They will be assigned primarily at Bagram Air Base north of Kabul, but also at other installations to support our counter terrorism missions. In addition, the force would include Special Forces advisors that will continue to train, advise and assist the Afghan Army in their long-term counter insurgency fight against the Taliban.

To guarantee we meet the first objective of protecting the Kabul Government from collapse, we should agree to provide U.S. air power, directed by our Special Forces personnel, if a major Taliban offensive threatens the collapse of the Kabul government. This combat action would look like the U.S. effort in 2001, when the combination of the U.S. Air Force, directed by our Special Forces on the ground, routed the Taliban.

The decision to enable this type of action would require approval by the highest level in Afghanistan and the President of the United States. If we do our training and advisory role well, and the Afghan government steps up to the task, this authority should never be needed. However, the guarantee of U.S. support would send a strong message to our friends and enemies about our commitment to Afghanistan.

The second objective -- pounding al Qaeda relentlessly -- is founded upon our aerial campaign (mostly drones). The US military and intelligence community have developed outstanding technologies for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance from both aerial and ground platforms. Coupled with the skill of our intelligence and military operators, we have become extraordinarily proficient at finding and killing terrorist leaders and destroying their infrastructure. Some claim this "wack-a-mole" approach does not work, as terrorists immediately regenerate their personnel and capability. But our enemies are not made of plastic. When hit, they die and a replacement does not immediately reappear. More often, terrorist

leaders “go to ground” when the pressure is hot, avoiding communicating and meeting in large groups. It is difficult to organize a terrorist plot when you are just trying to survive the next predator attack.

The strategy is working, and must not be abandoned prematurely.

Finally, al Qaeda still seeks weapons of mass destruction. If acquired, they will attempt to use them immediately to mass murder American civilians. This underscores the overriding importance of supporting a U.S. military presence in Afghanistan post 2014 – one that will guarantee our ability to crush al Qaeda Central.

Until then, we must not allow unwarranted pessimism to drive an unwise decision to withdraw entirely at the end of this year. We have been very successful so far, and we can remain successful with a modest military force in Afghanistan for a few more years, or until the al Qaeda movement lands in its inevitable place; the ash heap of history.

Michael A. Sheehan, a career Special Forces officer, is the Distinguished Chair of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. He recently served as the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict at the Department of Defense. He previously served as the Deputy Commissioner for Counter Terrorism at NYPD and as the Ambassador at Large for Counter Terrorism at the Department of State. The testimony represents his personal view, not that of the United States Military Academy or the Combating Terrorism Center.