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TESTIMONY

No Path to Glory

Deterring Homegrown Terrorism

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CT-348

May 2010

Testimony presented before the House Homeland Security Committee,
Subcommittee on Intelligence, Information Sharing and Terrorism Risk
Assessment on May 26, 2010

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No Path to Glory
Deterring Homegrown Terrorism²

Before the Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Intelligence, Information Sharing and Terrorism Risk Assessment
United States House of Representatives

May 26, 2010

Madame Chair, members of the subcommittee, thank you very much for the opportunity to address this important topic. It is an honor to again testify before Congress and, for the third time, before members of this subcommittee. The views I express are my own. I do not speak on behalf of any department, agency, organization, or political agenda.

A Determined, Resilient, Opportunistic and Adaptable Foe

Nearly nine years after 9/11, the principal terrorist threat still comes from a galaxy of jihadist groups that subscribe to or have been influenced by al Qaeda's ideology of a global armed struggle against the West. The complexity of the movement defies easy assessment. The ability of al Qaeda's central leadership to directly project its power through centrally planned and managed terrorist attacks has been reduced. Terrorist organizations now confront a more hostile operating environment: Al Qaeda has not been able to carry out a major terrorist attack in the West since the London bombings of 2005. For the time being, it has concentrated its resources and efforts on the conflicts in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

This should not imply that we are at a tipping point in the struggle against terrorism. Al Qaeda, its affiliates, and its allies, remain determined to continue to attack, and they have proved to be resilient, opportunistic, and adaptable, capable of morphing to meet new circumstances. Complacency on our part would be dangerous.

¹ The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of RAND or any of the sponsors of its research. This product is part of the RAND Corporation testimony series. RAND testimonies record testimony presented by RAND associates to federal, state, or local legislative committees; government-appointed commissions and panels; and private review and oversight bodies. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

² This testimony is available for free download at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT348/>.

A More Decentralized Terrorist Campaign

To carry on its international terrorist campaign, al Qaeda now relies on its affiliates, principally in North Africa, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula, and on its continuous exhortation to followers to do whatever they can, wherever they are. Other terrorist groups, while concentrating on local contests, have adopted al Qaeda's vision of a global struggle and may launch their own attacks or assist volunteers seeking support.

Emphasis on Do-It-Yourself Terrorism

The United States remains al Qaeda's primary target. Some analysts believe that al Qaeda is under growing pressure to prove that it can carry out another attack on U.S. soil in order to retain its credentials as the vanguard of the jihadist movement. Such an attack could take the form of an operation planned from abroad, like the Christmas Day airline bombing attempt, or it could be do-it-yourself attempts by homegrown terrorists responding to al Qaeda's call to action. Inevitably, one or more of these attacks may succeed.

Terrorist attempts are not evidence of our failure to protect the nation from terrorism, nor should they be cause for feigned outrage and divisive finger-pointing. They provide opportunities to learn lessons and improve defenses. The attempts reflect that we are at war—although the term has been largely discarded—and as in any war, the other side attacks.

America's Homegrown Terrorists

According to a recent RAND paper, there were 46 reported cases of radicalization and recruitment to jihadist terrorism in the United States between 9/11 and the end of 2009.³ This number does not include attacks from abroad. In all, 125 persons were involved in the 46 cases. Two more cases and several more arrests in 2010 bring the total to 131 persons. Half of the cases involve single individuals; the remainder are tiny conspiracies. The number of cases and the number of persons involved both increased sharply in 2009. Whether this presages a trend we cannot yet say. But these cases tell us that radicalization and recruitment to jihadist terrorism do happen here. They are clear indications of terrorist intent. The threat is real.

³ Brian Michael Jenkins, *Would-Be Warriors: Incidents of Jihadist Terrorist Radicalization in the United States Since September 11, 2001*, Santa Monica: The RAND Corporation OP-292-RC, 2010.

No Deep Reservoirs of Potential Recruits

Fortunately, the number of homegrown terrorists, most of whom are Muslims, is a tiny turnout in a Muslim American community of perhaps 3 million. (By contrast, several thousand Muslim Americans serve in the U.S. armed forces.) Al Qaeda's exhortations to violence are not resonating among the vast majority of Muslim Americans. There are veins of extremism, handfuls of hotheads, but no deep reservoirs from which al Qaeda can recruit. America's would-be jihadists are not Mao's fish swimming in a friendly sea.

The cases do not indicate an immigration or border-control problem. Almost all of those arrested for terrorist-related crimes are native-born or naturalized U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents. Most of them have lived in the United States for many years. There is no evidence that they were radicalized before coming to the United States. No armies of "sleepers" have infiltrated the country.

The Criminal Justice System Works

The cases also tell us that the U.S. criminal justice system works. With the exception of Jose Padilla, who was initially held as an enemy combatant, the individuals arrested in these cases (except for those who left to join jihad fronts abroad) were brought before U.S. courts and convicted or now await trial.

About a quarter of those identified have links with jihadist groups—al Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba, or the Taliban—but there is no underground network of foreign terrorist operatives, and there are no terrorist gangs in the United States like those active in the 1970s, when the level of terrorist violence was much higher than it is today.

Amateurs are Still Dangerous

Twenty-five of the 131 terrorists identified in the United States since 9/11 received some kind of terrorist indoctrination or training. Judging by the results, it was not very good. Al Qaeda clearly has quality-control problems. The plots have been amateurish. Only two attempts succeeded in causing casualties—significantly, both were carried out by lone gunmen, a problem in the United States that transcends terrorism. But amateurs are still dangerous. There is no long mile between the terrorist wannabe and the lethal zealot.

America's jihadists may suffer from substandard zeal. Only one became a suicide bomber, although Major Nidal Hasan may not have expected to survive his murderous rampage at Fort Hood. The rest planned to escape.

Most American jihadists appear to have radicalized themselves rather than having been recruited in the traditional sense. However, itinerant proselytizing recruiters appear in some of the cases, and active recruiting does occur in prisons. Many homegrown terrorists begin their journey to violent jihad on the Internet.

Diverse Personal Motives

The process of radicalization and recruitment to jihadist terrorist violence is complex and reflects a combination of individual circumstances and ideological motivations. Personal crisis and political cause are often paired in the process.

What does the jihadist acolyte seek in terrorism? Although recruitment may involve the rhetoric of religious belief, turning to violent jihad does not seem to result from profound religious discernment. Few jihadists appear to have more than a superficial knowledge of Islam. On the other hand, radicalization and recruitment do appear to be opportunities for an ostentatious display of piety, conviction, and commitment to their beliefs, ultimately expressed in violence.

Jihadists often use the need to avenge perceived assaults on Islam—insults to the religion, atrocities inflicted upon its believers, aggression by infidels against its people and territory, anger at specific U.S. policies—to justify their actions. These certainly are jihadist recruiting themes, but volunteer terrorists also view jihad as an opportunity for adventure, a chance to gain status in a subculture that exalts violence, to overcome perceived personal humiliation and prove manliness, to demonstrate prowess, to be perceived as a warrior in an epic struggle.

For lonely hearts, joining jihad offers a camaraderie that can sweep the more malleable along to schemes they would otherwise not have contemplated. For those who feel powerless, violent action offers the secret pleasures of clandestinity and power that come with the decision to kill.

Al Qaeda's ideology also has become a vehicle for resolving personal discontents, an opportunity to start life over, to transcend personal travail and turmoil through bloody violence, to soothe a restless soul with the spiritual comfort of an absolute ideology that dismisses the *now* as a brief passage between a glorious mythical past and eternal paradise. The jihadist may see terrorism as a path to glory in every sense of that word.

The Message to Would-Be Terrorists: No Path to Glory

Dealing with domestic radicalization does not mean countering jihadist propaganda. It means applying the law. What one believes is a matter of conscience. What one does to impose his or her beliefs on others concerns everyone. When a course of action involves the threat or use of violence, it becomes a matter of law. America's response to homegrown terrorism must, above all, be based upon the law.

The individualistic quality of radicalization and recruitment to jihadist terrorism in the United States suggests a counter-recruitment strategy that focuses on dissuading individuals from joining al Qaeda's version of jihad. This can be accomplished not through ideological or theological debate with al Qaeda's online communicators, but by deterrence through arrests, by treating terrorists and would-be terrorists as ordinary criminals, by stripping them of political pretensions.

The message to would-be terrorists should be that they can trust no one. They will fail. They will be detected and apprehended. They will be treated as ordinary criminals and will spend a long time in a prison cell. They will receive no applause. They will disgrace their families and their communities. They will be labeled fools. Their lives will be wasted. There will be no glory.

Authorities could go further and consider something like Italy's so-called "repentant program," in which convicted terrorists were offered reduced sentences in return for their cooperation. This kind of program differs from routine plea-bargaining and from efforts abroad to rehabilitate terrorists. A "repentant" program would reward those who not only provide authorities with operational intelligence, but also contribute to understanding the recruitment process itself, and who actively participate in efforts to discourage others from following the same destructive path. It would let the denunciations of al Qaeda motivator al-Awlaki come from his own acolytes.

Local Authorities are Best Placed to Counter Recruiting

Preventing future terrorist attacks will require the active cooperation of the American Muslim community, which is the target of jihadist recruiting. It will require effective domestic intelligence collection. Both are best accomplished by local authorities.

The first line of defense against radicalization and recruitment to jihadist terrorism in the Muslim-American community *is* the Muslim-American community. America's invasion of Iraq, its support

for Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia, and its current military efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan have created some pockets of resentment, but polls indicate little support for al Qaeda's jihadist fantasies among American Muslims. Cooperation against terrorism means more than the public denunciations of al Qaeda that many non-Muslim Americans demand as proof of Muslims' patriotism, nor should tips to police be the sole metric.

Much of the defense against jihadist radicalization will be invisible—quiet discouragement, interventions by family members and friends, and when necessary, discreet assistance to the authorities. Reports indicate that this is already taking place.

Community policing can maintain the cooperation that is needed. This does not involve police in religious or political debates, which are matters for the community. It requires building and maintaining trust between the community and local authorities and understanding local communities and diasporas, their problems, and their concerns.

Community cooperation will not prevent all terrorist attempts. Respected community leaders may have limited influence over more radical elements or may have no clue about tiny conspiracies or individuals who are on an interior journey to terrorism.

Members of the community must realize that while they play an important role in discouraging terrorism, they cannot be intermediaries in criminal investigations or intelligence operations aimed at preventing terrorist attacks. American Muslims should not regard themselves or be perceived by others as targets because they are Muslims. But being Muslim brings no privileged or separate status.

Disruption of Terrorist Plots: An Undeniable Intelligence Success

Twenty-five of the reported cases of homegrown terrorism involved plots to carry out attacks in the United States. Only three—including the failed Times Square bombing attempt—got as far as implementation, an undeniable intelligence success. And no doubt, other terrorist plots have been disrupted without arrests, while the publicized success of authorities has had a deterrent effect on still other plotters.

Intelligence has improved since 9/11. Federal government agencies share more information with each other and with local police departments and fusion centers, although there are still some problems. But connecting dots is not enough, and the emphasis on information-sharing should not distract us from the difficult and delicate task of domestic intelligence collection.

Domestic Intelligence Collection Remains Haphazard

The diffuse nature of today's terrorist threat and the emphasis on do-it-yourself terrorism challenge the presumption that knowledge of terrorist plots will come first to federal authorities, who will then share this information with state and local authorities. It is just as likely—perhaps more likely—that local law enforcement could be the first to pick up the clues of future conspiracies.

Local police departments are best placed to collect domestic intelligence. Their ethnic composition reflects the local community. They know the territory. They don't rotate to a new city every three or four years. They report to local authorities. But they often lack an understanding of intelligence and require resources and training.

Despite the clear need for improved domestic intelligence, collection remains haphazard. The Joint Terrorism Task Forces are extremely effective, but they are case-oriented, and investigation differs from intelligence. The fusion centers are venues for sharing information and have diverse responsibilities, but few collect intelligence.

An Army of On-Line Jihadists but Few Terrorists

The Internet plays an important role in contemporary terrorism, as jihadists have effectively demonstrated. It allows global communications, critical to a movement determined to build an army of believers. It facilitates recruiting. It is accessible to seekers, reinforcing and channeling their anger. It creates online communities of like-minded extremists, engaging them in constant activity. It is a source of instruction. It facilitates clandestine communication.

The Internet, however, has not enabled al Qaeda, despite its high volume of sophisticated communications, to provoke a global intifada. Its websites and chat rooms outnumber its Western recruits. Its on-line exhortations to Americans have produced a very meager return—an army of on-line jihadists, but only a tiny cohort of terrorists in the real world. And while the Internet offers would-be terrorists a continuing tutorial on tactics and improvised weapons, again thus far, this has not yet significantly improved terrorist skills.

Moreover, the Internet provides insights into jihadist thinking and strategy and has proved to be a source of intelligence leading to arrests. This must be kept in perspective when considering countermeasures. These might include ways to address the issue of anonymity and facilitate

investigations—and here, terrorist use of the Internet represents only one facet of a much larger problem of cyber-crime.

I have no doubt that jihadists will attempt further terrorist attacks. Some will succeed. That is war. But I also have no doubt that these attacks will not defeat this republic or destroy its values without our active complicity, as long as we do not yield to terror.