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TESTIMONY

The al Qaeda-Inspired Terrorist Threat

An Appreciation of the Current Situation

BRIAN MICHAEL JENKINS

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December 2010

Testimony presented before the Canadian Senate Special Committee on Anti-terrorism on December 6, 2010

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Before the Special Committee on Anti-terrorism
Senate of Canada

December 6, 2010

Lack of Consensus

More than nine years after 9/11, analysts are still remarkably divided in their assessments of where we are in the global campaign against al Qaeda-inspired terrorism. Intelligence is imperfect. There is much uncertainty. The lack of front lines or other obvious metrics makes progress hard to measure. We cannot easily calibrate the adversary's determination.

Al Qaeda has become many things and therefore must be assessed from different angles. It is the heir to a long tradition of jihad, the banner carrier and symbol of a radical expression of faith. It is the author of an ideology and strategy of war, the center of a global network of like-minded fanatics, the instigator of a global terrorist campaign, and an active communications system augmented by an online army. Al Qaeda is a brand name that still has value, although it has been tarnished by the jihadists' violent excesses. It is a source of inspiration and a contributor to ongoing insurgencies in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Algeria, and elsewhere, an ally of other extremist groups, a conveyer of societal and individual discontents, a magnet for the most violent jihadists, and a source of legitimacy for their violence. Each of these dimensions of al Qaeda and individual conflicts has its own trajectory and therefore must be assessed separately.

And what can be counted? Ultimately, the effects of terrorism are primarily psychological. Perceptions count more than statistics.

Opinions differ. Some see al Qaeda as a shadow of what it was on 9/11. Others argue that today's al Qaeda is even stronger. Some analysts assert that Al Qaeda's central leadership can

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do little more than exhort others to fight. But then what about the evidence of continued connectivity and centrally directed plots such as the 2006 Heathrow bomb plot, the 2009 plot to blow up New York's subways, and the Pakistan-based plots in 2010 to attack European cities? Some view homegrown terrorism as a feeble response to al Qaeda's intense online campaign to embrace armed jihad. Others see it as a growing threat.

Have we made progress? Let's look at where al Qaeda was in 2001, and where they are now.

Al Qaeda in 2001

Obviously, al Qaeda today differs from al Qaeda on 9/11, when its spectacular terrorist attacks revived the narrative of the Prophet's armed struggle and fired the imagination of many Muslims, including those who opposed its ideology. Al Qaeda's self-proclaimed jihad became a force to be reckoned with.

Al Qaeda itself was a small core of extremists—it was always a tiny army, but it located itself at the center of a global network of terrorist operatives and expanding relations with other groups. It benefited from Taliban protection in Afghanistan and from benign neglect, if not active assistance, from Pakistan. It ran easily accessible training camps, which were a magnet for recruits to its ideology of global jihad. Its terrorist operations were strategic and centrally directed. It had ambitious plans on its drawing boards.

In a 2002 briefing, I said that in order to survive as the center of this armed jihad, al Qaeda had to protect its own leadership; relocate to a new secure base; reconfigure itself and find a new, more clandestine way of operating; develop a command system able to function in a more hostile environment. It had to be able to communicate with its field commanders, operatives, potential volunteers, and constituents; maintain its cash flow; and, above all, continue its terrorist campaign in order to continue its recruiting. Since 2002, al Qaeda has managed to do most of these things.

Al Qaeda in 2010

Since 2001, undeniable progress has been made in degrading al Qaeda's operational capabilities. Unprecedented cooperation among the world's intelligence services and law enforcement organizations has made al Qaeda's operating environment a lot more dangerous. Protected by local tribes and the Taliban, a small core of leaders survives somewhere in Pakistan, but they are continuously hunted, and key operational leaders have been removed. The loss of this precious talent has created a quality-control problem. Training continues in Pakistan, but the camps are

not as easily accessible as they were ten years ago. Al Qaeda's finances have been squeezed, but contributions continue to arrive from wealthy supporters in the Gulf.

There is no longer a wide global network run directly by al Qaeda itself. Al Qaeda Central remains in business, but the sinews of command are frayed. Its global terrorist campaign is of necessity now more decentralized, more dependent on local affiliates and allies. Between 2002 and 2005, while al Qaeda's core was under immense pressure, the organization's alumni launched a series of spectacular attacks in Tunisia, Kenya, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Turkey, and Egypt. These pyrrhic victories provoked crackdowns—in some cases, by governments that might have preferred to be spectators but when directly threatened, ferociously attacked their foes. At the same time, however, al Qaeda found new sources of support and new theaters of operation in Iraq, Somalia, Algeria, and Yemen. Attempts to clone al Qaeda in Lebanon and Palestine have thus far proved less successful. A parasite enterprise, Al Qaeda appears strongest where it can attach itself to local conflicts in weak states.

Al Qaeda also benefits from its relationship with nearby like-minded groups that are not under its control and that have their own political and military agendas: Afghanistan's Taliban, the TTP, LeT, and others in Pakistan and India. Beyond disseminating its ideology of global struggle, the nature of al Qaeda's contribution to these movements is unclear. Some analysts see these dependencies as evidence of al Qaeda's weakness, but the radicalization resulting from the relationships and the fact that recruits from the various groups are increasingly commingled in training camps and operations suggest that it may be a source of strength—at least, a guarantee of long-term survival.

Al Qaeda Central's capability to project power in the form of terrorist attacks has diminished. Global attacks are concentrated in a broad arc from the Maghreb to Mumbai. Occasional attacks occur in more distant Muslim regions. Al Qaeda-inspired jihadists have not been able to carry out a successful, significant terrorist operation in the West since 2005, although numerous plots have been uncovered and thwarted.

Al Qaeda's paramount objective remains building an army of believers who will take up arms, provoking a worldwide armed movement. Its determination is undiminished. The volume and sophistication of al Qaeda's communications have increased. There are now thousands of websites devoted to exhortation and instruction in the means of violence. Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda's number two, Ayman al-Zawahiri, communicate regularly, supported by a second echelon of spokesmen who speak directly to overseas constituents. A third tier of online jihadists

adds to the retail outlets broadcasting al Qaeda's message. When al Qaeda talks, many listen; some even applaud. But that has not translated into an Islamic uprising, a global intifada.

Nevertheless, al Qaeda's determination to continue the armed struggle appears undiminished. Whatever inner doubts its leaders may have, they are not on display. Al Qaeda's affiliates demonstrate a continuing capacity for violence. The situation in Afghanistan, where a year ago, American and NATO forces were judged to be losing, has not yet convincingly turned around. Analysts now argue about the importance of the struggle in Afghanistan to al Qaeda's survival. Meanwhile, the growing role played by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula gives the global enterprise a new base of operations. Al Qaeda's campaign may morph, but it will likely continue for many years.

A Briefing to bin Laden

This is how things look to us. But what might a briefing to bin Laden look like? Al Qaeda's assessment of its own situation differs fundamentally from ours, not simply because it sees things from the other side, but because its belief system, worldview, notions of war, and concepts of strategy differ completely from our own.

Al Qaeda asserts that Islam is under assault, in mortal danger from the West. Its leaders portray events since 9/11 as confirmation of their warning that hostile infidels led by America are determined to conquer all of Islam, and that this aggression will continue unless it is checked by armed resistance. Apostate and corrupt governments of Muslims, in al Qaeda's worldview, have ceased to be defenders of the faith. Instead, they have joined the oppressors.

It is not simply a clash of arms. In al Qaeda's view, infidel culture corrupts the soul. Muslims must be awakened to the danger. Jihad, not as a personal spiritual quest, but as armed action, is the antidote. For al Qaeda, taking up arms is an individual duty that allows one to demonstrate conviction, prowess as a warrior, worthiness before God. Judgment Day awaits those who do not fulfill that duty.

The battle is eternal. There are no timetables. According to al Qaeda, this conflict began centuries ago and will continue until all infidels see the truth or on Judgment Day—as al Qaeda's chief operational planner, Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, put it, "War is life."

Reward comes from participation, not the outcome of battles. The conflict is process-oriented, not progress-oriented as in the West. But triumph is inevitable because God is on the side of the jihadists.

War is not a continuous campaign but, like desert warfare, a series of individual battles, ambushes, and raids intended to make the enemy's life untenable. Terrorist attacks demonstrate enemy vulnerabilities, inspire others, awaken the masses, and attract recruits. Al Qaeda's strategy is not based upon military superiority. Rather, al Qaeda's spiritual superiority will ultimately triumph over its enemy's technological superiority. Bloodied and exhausted, America and its Western allies eventually will withdraw.

Strategy does not drive operations—operations *are* the strategy. In order to scatter and exhaust its enemies, al Qaeda must launch attacks on all fronts. It is a global war. The battlefield is everywhere. There are no front lines, no home fronts, no distinction between combatants and non-combatants.

Strategy also derives from revelation. According to al Qaeda's worldview, every development is part of God's grand design. Al Qaeda's strategists must discern how things are—how God has determined they will be—then reconcile this with al Qaeda's particular circumstances in such a way as to prove that the organization is on the right track, that is, in accord with God's will. A cynical observer might say that this blends strategy with propaganda, but al Qaeda's true believers make no distinction. Al Qaeda's strategists say, in effect, that this is where God has placed us. By following this strategic course, we will be aligned with God's will and therefore assured of victory.

With this mindset, al Qaeda, not surprisingly, believes it is on the right path. It could not be otherwise. The briefing to bin Laden might declare, *"We have survived the infidels' mightiest blows. Our top leadership has evaded capture or death—evidence of divine protection. The infidels' attacks have only strengthened our resolve."*

"We have improved our communications. Our views are widely-discussed throughout the world. We continue to attract recruits."

"Al Qaeda fronts are operating in Iraq, where we have established the first caliphate since the abolition of the former caliphate by Turkey in 1924; in North Africa, where we have blocked the designs of 'Crusader France'; in Somalia, where we repulsed Ethiopia's invasion and are defeating the Western-backed government; in the Arabian Peninsula, from which our local commanders have launched attacks into the West; in Pakistan, where we have brought down America's puppet Mushareff; in Afghanistan, where we have reestablished ourselves, where enemy forces grow weary of combat while their commanders admit publicly that they cannot win."

Exhausted by endless fighting, the NATO alliance is falling apart, and Americans are increasingly divided on further commitments.”

“We have disrupted American plans to reshape the Middle East. We have compelled the United States to scatter its forces all over the world, yet its military actions are only provoking greater antagonism. New terrorist attacks are being prepared. The West’s increased investments in security are evidence of our growing strength.”

“The world’s current economic crisis is further evidence that we are on the right path. It is God’s punishment for the infidels’ materialism and corruption, proof of their decline and eventual defeat.”

“The Soviet Union was brought to its knees in Afghanistan. Forced to withdraw in defeat, it soon collapsed. This will happen again.”

Such a briefing, although imaginary, would, in part, be an accurate portrayal of the situation; in part, it would reflect the jihadists’ own beliefs. The briefing claims credit for preventing aggression that the briefer imagines would have occurred were it not for al Qaeda’s actions. It measures al Qaeda’s strength by the magnitude of its enemy’s efforts, which, given the nature of this mode of conflict, will always be unequal. It points to paper achievements like the caliphate in Iraq. It includes boasts about what the jihadists would do (if they could), as if these were actual achievements. It interprets broader developments like the global economic crisis as a consequence of the jihadists’ own actions and God’s will, characteristically making no distinction between the two.

Homegrown Terrorism

What about this up-tick in homegrown plotters that we have seen? Does this represent a setback, a growing danger?

Al Qaeda’s recruiting was always global, but it has become more difficult to get its acolytes to training sites in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Recognizing this reality, the organization now places increased emphasis on do-it-yourself terrorism, urging local would-be warriors to do whatever they can, wherever they are.

Al Qaeda’s communicators know that homegrown attacks provoke greater alarm than engagements on distant battlefronts. They can count on the news media, partisan politics, and

public anxiety to exaggerate the threat. People in the West have unrealistically come to expect 100 percent security, viewing any terrorist attempt as a failure on the part of those charged with their protection.

Attacks by homegrown terrorists arouse suspicion of local Muslim communities. They prompt rhetoric and reactions that can be portrayed as anti-Muslim, thereby fostering resentment and facilitating al Qaeda recruiting.

Even foiled attempts and deliberate hoaxes have utility. They require little investment, which al Qaeda now brags about, but they bring high returns. High body counts remain a desirable terrorist goal, but creating terror will suffice. This change in al Qaeda's rhetoric—embracing useful failure—represents a fundamental shift, a lowering of the bar.

Thus far, the number of would-be warriors responding to al Qaeda's appeals remains small. I hesitate to comment on the threat posed by local jihadists in Canada, which I have not studied. My observations derive from my analysis of radicalization and recruitment to jihadist terrorism in the United States.³ I suspect that there are similarities. Most of the terrorist plots uncovered in the United States appear to be one-off responses. They indicate veins of resentment, pools of radicals, handfuls of terrorists, but they do not provide evidence of extensive terrorist undergrounds or armies of sleepers.

We have developed a fair understanding of the radicalization process, but we cannot predict who will become a terrorist. No doubt, some start down the path but drop out before crossing the line into terrorist activity. We know only about those who have carried out attacks, plotted to carry out attacks, attempted to join terrorist groups abroad, or provided terrorists with material assistance.

These appear to be a diverse lot. The majority are U.S. citizens, the others are legal permanent residents. Few entered the country illegally.

They represent a number of Arab and South Asian immigrant communities, with Pakistan and Somalia heavily represented. Ages range from the teens to the seventies, with the median in the late twenties, a bit older than most criminal offenders.

Some of the homegrown terrorists are dropouts. Some have advanced university degrees. A good percentage of the 125 arrested in the United States could be described as having the

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

experience and skills that would make them dangerous. Some have seen military service. Some attended terrorist training camps. Some gained their experience on the streets. Twenty-three had criminal records for charges including petty crime, armed robbery, and drug dealing.

Almost all were self-radicalized rather than recruited, although some of latter may have been swept along by more fanatic companions. Most began their journey to terrorism on the Internet, where they could readily find resonance and reinforcement of their own discontents and interlocutors who would legitimize and direct their anger.

Many operated alone. Most of the terrorist plots were amateurish, displaying limited capabilities. This is not to say that they were not dangerous. Prisons are filled with felons who could be described as dumb but dangerous. No great distance separates a half-baked plot from a lethal terrorist attack. The critical ingredient is often no more than one determined, reasonably competent individual.

At issue here are intentions, not competence. The would-be jihadists who have been identified demonstrated earnest intent. Their ideological commitment was manifest. They were ready to be terrorists.

Al Qaeda promises masculine glory and a sensual afterlife to frustrated young men. But martyrdom is not a political program, and re-establishment of a caliphate offers little to those seeking political freedom, equality under the law, employment, education, a better life on earth for themselves and their children, which may be why most of al Qaeda's intended audience has ignored its summons. The greatest long-term threat to al Qaeda is irrelevance.

Nonetheless, al Qaeda will continue to be a tenacious and resilient foe. Its campaign, now in its third decade, will almost certainly go on. Successfully countering it must be viewed as a long-term effort, a very long-term effort—not a finite war with a clear beginning and end, or a permanent war without end, but not the peace we would all prefer.