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TESTIMONY

The Future of Al Qa'ida

SETH G. JONES

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Testimony presented before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade on May 24, 2011

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Seth G. Jones[1]
The RAND Corporation

The Future of Al Qa'ida[2]

Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade
United States House of Representatives

May 24, 2011

The death of Osama bin Laden has triggered a re-evaluation of al Qa'ida and its threat to the United States. Some have argued that al Qa'ida will become increasingly irrelevant. "Between the Arab Spring and the death of bin Laden, it is hard to imagine greater blows to al-Qaeda's ideology and organization," wrote terrorism analyst Peter Bergen, noting that bin Laden was on the wrong side of history. "For al-Qaeda," he continued, "that history just sped up, as bin Laden's body floated down into the ocean deeps and its proper place in the unmarked grave of discarded lies."[3]

Yet such assessments may be too optimistic. Al Qa'ida and allied groups continue to present a grave threat to the United States and its allies overseas by overseeing and encouraging terrorist operations, managing a robust propaganda campaign, conducting training, and collecting and distributing financial assistance. Two examples illustrate the point. First, al Qa'ida operatives like Ilyas Kashmiri, who remain at large, continue to be actively involved in plots in Europe, India, and the United States. Second, there has been an increase in the number of groups outside of central al Qa'ida that have targeted the United States. On May 1, 2010, Faisal Shahzad, who was trained by Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan bomb-makers, packed his Nissan Pathfinder with explosives and drove into Times Square in New York City on a congested Saturday night. Only fortune intervened, since the improvised explosive device malfunctioned. Indeed, the nature of the threat has changed and become more decentralized. In addition to central al Qa'ida (Pakistan), other threats to the U.S. homeland include Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (Yemen), Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (Pakistan), Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (Pakistan), and potentially al Shabaab (Somalia).

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[2] This testimony is available for free download at http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT362/.

[3] Peter Bergen, "Bin Laden's Poisonous Ideology Began to Wither on 9/11," *Time*, May 9, 2011.

I. Al Qa'ida's Organizational Structure

A current assessment of the al Qa'ida threat requires an understanding of what al Qa'ida is today. With a leadership structure primarily in Pakistan, al Qa'ida is a notably different organization than a decade ago and can perhaps best be described as a "complex adaptive system."[4] The term refers to systems that are diverse (composing multiple networks) and adaptive (possessing the capacity to evolve and learn from experience). One key element of complex adaptive systems is they include a series of networks, which are often dispersed and small. Different nodes can communicate and conduct their campaigns with some coordination. As terrorist expert Bruce Hoffman argued, al Qa'ida is "in the main flatter, more linear, and more organizationally networked" than it has previously been.[5] The killing of bin Laden may accelerate this decentralization.

Al Qa'ida today can perhaps best be divided into five tiers: central al Qa'ida, affiliated groups, allied groups, allied networks, and inspired individuals.[6]

First, *central al Qa'ida* includes the organization's leaders, who are based in Pakistan. Despite the death of key figures like Osama bin Laden, several top leaders remain, including Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al Qa'ida's goals continue to include overthrowing regimes in the Middle East (the near enemy, or *al-Adou al-Qareeb*) to establish a pan-Islamic caliphate, and fighting the United States and its allies (the far enemy, or *al-Adou al-Baeed*) who support them. As demonstrated over the past year, Ilyas Kashmiri has been involved in plots to conduct Mumbai-style attacks in Europe and to target a newspaper in Copenhagen that published cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. Abu Yahya al-Libi has been one of al Qa'ida's senior ideologues and religious figures. Atiyah abd al-Rahman al-Libi has played a key role as al Qa'ida's chief operating officer and general manager, serving as a conduit between al Qa'ida's affiliated groups and its leadership. A range of senior officials, including Saif al-Adel and Abu Miqad al-Masri, continue to play key roles. Finally, there are a range of Americans in central al Qa'ida (such as Adam Gadahn) and operatives that have lived in America (such as Adnan el Shukrijumah).

The second tier includes a range of *affiliated groups* that have become formal branches of al Qa'ida. They benefit from bin Laden's financial assistance and inspiration, and receive at least some guidance, training, arms, money, or other support. They often add "al Qa'ida" to their name

[4] See, for example, Murray Gell-Mann, *The Quark and the Jaguar* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994); John Holland, *Hidden Order* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995); Kevin Dooley, "A Complex Adaptive Systems Model of Organization Change," *Nonlinear Dynamics, Psychology, and Life Science*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1997, pp. 69-97.
[5] Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, Revised Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 285.
[6] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*.

to identify themselves as affiliated organizations, such as Al Qa'ida in Iraq (led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi), Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (led by Nasir al-Wahishi), Al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (led by Abdelmalek Droukdal), and Al Qa'ida East Africa (led by Harun Fazul). Al Qa'ida's senior leadership, including Ayman al-Zawahiri, retain a degree of oversight and, when necessary, may discipline members of these groups for failing to follow guidance.

The third involves *allied groups* that have established a direct relationship with al Qa'ida, but have not become formal members. This arrangement allows the groups to remain independent and pursue their own goals, but to work with al Qa'ida for specific operations or training purposes when their interests converge. In Pakistan, one example is Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (led by Hakimullah Mehsud), whose interests remain largely parochial in South Asia, though they have been involved in attacks overseas – including the U.S. homeland. Another is Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (led by Hafiz Saeed), which is based in Pakistan and has historically operated in India and Kashmir, though it has expanded its interests to include Afghanistan, Europe, and perhaps the United States. Outside of Pakistan, there are other allied groups like al Shabaab (led by Ahmed Abd aw-Mohamed), which operates in Somalia but has a relationship with diaspora communities across the world, including in the United States.

The fourth tier involves *allied networks* – small, dispersed groups of adherents who enjoy some direct connection with al Qa'ida. These groups are not large insurgent organizations, but often self-organized small networks that congregate, radicalize, and plan attacks. In some cases, they comprise individuals who had prior terrorism experience in Algeria, the Balkans, Chechnya, Afghanistan, or perhaps Iraq. In other cases, they include individuals that have traveled to camps in Afghanistan or Pakistan for training, as with Mohammed Siddique Khan and the British Muslims responsible for the successful July 2005 London bombing. Al Qa'ida operatives Abu Ubaydah al-Masri and Abd al-Hadi al-Iraqi were involved in the planning and training for the attack.

Finally, the *inspired individuals* include those with no direct contact to al Qa'ida central, but who are inspired by the al Qa'ida cause and outraged by perceived oppression in Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Palestinian territory. They tend to be motivated by a hatred of the West and its allied regimes in the Middle East. Without direct support, these networks tend to be amateurish, though they can occasionally be lethal. In May 2007, a cell inspired by Anwar al-Aulaqi and Osama bin Laden planned an attack against Fort Dix and other military targets in New Jersey, but were thwarted by the FBI. But many others, such as the cell led by Russell Defreitas that plotted to attack New York City's John F. Kennedy International Airport in 2007, were rudimentary and their half-baked plots would have been difficult to execute.

Taken together, al Qa'ida had transformed itself by 2011 into a more diffuse – and more global – terror network. Osama bin Laden's death will probably speed up this development since no leader, including Ayman al-Zawahiri, likely has the unifying ability that bin Laden possessed. Bin Laden was an inspiring leader for many radicals, as well as a former soldier who was involved in the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan. He had a calm demeanor, even during stressful situations, and was viewed by radicals as a pious Muslim. This last perceived trait was an ironic one for someone willing to kill scores of civilians, including innocent women and children. Bin Laden also had a tendency to listen. When discussing issues, for example, bin Laden would often consider the opinions of everyone involved, giving each person his attention. But when he made up his mind, he could be myopic and bull-headed. As his son Omar recalled, "his stubbornness had brought him many problems. Once he wished for something, he never gave up."[7]

Zawahiri's raison d'être, however, has been as a spiritual leader, not a soldier. He has authored a litany of books and communiqués, but has never been a battlefield commander. He has also been more divisive than bin Laden and engaged in notorious public squabbles with members of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and other organizations. It is unclear whether al Qa'ida's affiliated groups will seek regular guidance from Zawahiri, at least in the way they sought guidance from bin Laden.

II. Debating the Threat

There have been some disagreements about the nature and origin of threats to the U.S. homeland. In his 2011 testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Homeland Security Committee, Michael Leiter, director of the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center, remarked that al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula is "probably the most significant risk to the U.S. homeland."[8] Others have argued that al Qa'ida has a nearly endless supply of sanctuaries in weak states, such as Yemen, Somalia, Djibouti, Sudan, and even Iraq. "Many of these countries," notes Stephen Biddle from the Council on Foreign Relations, "could offer al-Qa'ida better havens than Afghanistan ever did."[9]

While this argument seems reasonable, and Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula certainly poses a clear threat to the U.S. homeland, the evidence suggests that al Qa'ida leaders retain an

[7] Najwa bin Laden, Omar bin Laden, and Jean Sasson, *Growing Up Bin Laden: Osama's Wife and Son Take Us Inside Their Secret World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009), p. 253.
[8] Testimony of Michael Leiter, Director of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), Hearing of the House Homeland Security Committee, February 9, 2011.
[9] Stephen Biddle, "Is It Worth It? The Difficult Case for War in Afghanistan," *The American Interest*, July-August 2009.

unparalleled relationship with local networks in the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier. Ayman al-Zawahiri and several senior al Qa'ida leaders have a 30-year, unique history of trust and collaboration with the Pashtun militant networks located in Pakistan and Afghanistan. These relationships are deeper and more robust than the comparatively nascent, tenuous, and fluid relationships that al Qa'ida has developed with al Shabaab in Somalia, local tribes in Yemen, or other areas. Indeed, al Qa'ida has become embedded in multiple networks that operate on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Key groups include the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, Haqqani Network, and Lashkar-e Tayyiba. Al Qa'ida has effectively established a foothold with several tribes or sub-tribes in the region, such as some Ahmadzai Wazirs, Mehsuds, Utmanzai Wazirs, Mohmands, Salarzais, and Zadrans. The secret to al Qa'ida's staying power, it turns out, has been its success in cultivating supportive networks in an area generally inhospitable to outsiders.

Al Qa'ida provides several types of assistance to Pakistan militant groups in return for sanctuary. One is coordination. It has helped establish shuras (councils) to coordinate strategic priorities, operational campaigns, and tactics against Western allied forces. In addition, al Qa'ida operatives have been involved in planning military operations, such as launching suicide attacks, emplacing improvised explosive devices, and helping conduct ambushes and raids. It also helps run training camps for militants, which cover the recruitment and preparation of suicide bombers, intelligence, media and propaganda efforts, bomb-making, and religious indoctrination. Al Qa'ida provides some financial aid to militant groups, though it appears to be a small percentage of their total aid. Finally, it has cooperated with Pakistan militant groups to improve and coordinate propaganda efforts, including through the use of DVDs, CDs, jihadi websites, and other media forums.

Some pundits have argued that al Qa'ida operatives primarily reside in Pakistan, not Afghanistan. But the 1,519-mile border, drawn up in 1893 by Sir Henry Mortimer Durand, the British Foreign Secretary of India, is largely irrelevant. Locals regularly cross the border to trade, pray at mosques, visit relatives, and – in some cases – target NATO and coalition forces. Indeed, al Qa'ida migration patterns since the anti-Soviet jihad show frequent movement in both directions. Osama bin Laden established al Qa'ida in Peshawar, Pakistan in 1988, though he and other Arab fighters crossed the border into Afghanistan regularly to fight Soviet forces and support the mujahedeen. When bin Laden returned to the area in 1996 from Sudan, he settled near Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan and later moved south to Kandahar Province. After the overthrow of the Taliban regime, however, most of the al Qa'ida leadership moved back to Pakistan, though some settled in neighboring Iran.

Other skeptics contend that informal, homegrown networks inspired by al Qa'ida have become the most serious threat to the West.[10] Ayman al-Zawahiri and central al Qa'ida have become extraneous, according to this argument. Skeptics contend that impressionable young Muslims can radicalize through the Internet or interactions with local extremist networks. They don't need a headquarters, the argument goes. These skeptics contend that the threat to the West, therefore, comes largely from a "leaderless jihad" in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and North America rather than a relationship with central al Qa'ida located in Pakistan. As discussed in the next section, however, there is sparse evidence to support this argument.

III. The Terrorist Threat to the U.S. Homeland

Many of the terrorist threats to the U.S. homeland have been connected to al Qa'ida and its allies in Pakistan, though a few have been tied to such areas as Yemen. Sparsely few serious attacks have come from purely homegrown terrorists. Central al Qa'ida has long focused on attacking the U.S. homeland.

In September 2009, for example, Najibullah Zazi was arrested for planning attacks on the New York City subway. Zazi pleaded guilty in U.S. District Court to "conspiracy to use weapons of mass destruction" and "providing material support for a foreign terrorist organization" based in Pakistan.[11] Several al Qa'ida operatives, including Saleh al-Somali and Adnan el Shukrijumah, were involved in the plot. According to U.S. government documents, Zazi's travels to Pakistan and his contacts with individuals there were pivotal in helping him build an improvised explosive device using triacetone triperoxide (TATP), the same explosive used effectively in the 2005 London subway bombings. In October 2009, Chicago-based David Coleman Headley (aka Daood Sayed Gilani) was arrested for involvement in terrorist activity. He is a Pakistani-American who had cooperated with Lashkar-e Tayyiba and senior al Qa'ida leaders to conduct a series of attacks, including the November 2008 Mumbai attack and a plot to attack a newspaper in Copenhagen that had published a cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad. His base in Chicago made him ideally suited for a future attack in the U.S. homeland.

In December 2009, five Americans from Alexandria, Virginia – Ahmed Abdullah Minni, Umar Farooq, Aman Hassan Yemer, Waqar Hussain Khan, and Ramy Zamzam –were arrested in Pakistan and later convicted on terrorism charges. Better known as "Five Guys," a reference to the hamburger chain close to their homes along Route One in Alexandria, they radicalized in the

[10] Mark Sagemen, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), pp. 133, 140.
[11] U.S. District Court, Eastern District of New York, United States of America Against Najibullah Zazi, 09 CR 663(S-1), February 22, 2010.

United States and went to Pakistan for training and operational guidance. In May 2010, Faisal Shahzad attempted to detonate an improvised explosive device in Times Square in New York City after being trained by bomb-makers from Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan.

Europe has faced similar threats. The 2004 Madrid attacks involved senior al Qa'ida leaders, including Amer Azizi.[12] The 2005 London attacks and 2006 transatlantic airlines plot involved senior al Qa'ida operatives in Pakistan, who were involved in strategic, operational, and even tactical support. Jonathan Evans, the Director General of MI5, the United Kingdom's domestic intelligence agency, recently acknowledged that at least half of the country's priority plots continue to be linked to "al Qa'ida in the tribal areas of Pakistan, where al Qa'ida senior leadership is still based."[13] Over the last decade, there has been a laundry list of plots and attacks in the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, Netherlands, France, India, and other countries with links to al Qa'ida and other terrorist groups with a foothold in Pakistan.

IV. Countering the Threat

While the al Qa'ida threat has remained severe, the United States has struggled to pursue an effective counterterrorism strategy. In examining 648 terrorist groups, I found that most groups end in one of two ways. Either they join the political process, or else small networks of clandestine intelligence and security forces arrest or kill the leadership. Large-scale, conventional military forces have rarely been the primary reason for the end of terrorist groups, and few groups achieve victory. Military forces may help penetrate and garrison an area frequented by terrorist groups and, if well sustained, may temporarily reduce terrorist activity. But once the situation in an area becomes untenable for terrorists, they will transfer their activity to another location. Terrorists groups generally fight wars of the weak. They do not put large, organized forces into the field, except when they engage in insurgencies. This means that military forces can rarely engage terrorist groups using what most armies are trained in: conventional tactics, techniques, and procedures. In some cases, such as when terrorist groups ally with large and well-equipped insurgent groups, conventional forces may be more apropos.[14]

By 2011, however, U.S. policymakers seemed to better understand the utility of clandestine efforts. The United States and Pakistan increased covert efforts against al Qa'ida, improving their intelligence collection capabilities and nearly tripling the number of drone strikes in Pakistan from

[12] Fernando Reinares, "The Madrid Bombings and Global Jihadism," *Survival*, Vol. 52, No. 2, April–May 2010, pp. 83–104.
[13] Jonathan Evans, "The Threat to National Security," Address at the Worshipful Company of Security Professionals by the Director General of the Security Service, September 16, 2010.
[14] Seth G. Jones and Martin Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering Al Qa'ida* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND 2008).

2009 levels. Recognizing the importance of al Qa'ida's local hosts, the United States and Pakistan stepped up efforts to recruit assets among rival sub-tribes and clans in the border areas.

In Pakistan, there were a range of senior-level officials killed – such as Osama bin Laden, chief financial officer Shaykh Sa'aid al-Masri, and external operations chief Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Najdi – through a combination of U.S. Special Operations and intelligence efforts. This left perhaps less than 300 al Qa'ida members in Pakistan, though there were larger numbers of foreign fighters and allied organizations. In late 2010, Ayman al-Zawahiri ordered al Qa'ida operatives to disperse into small groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan, away from the tribal areas, and cease most activities for a period of up to one year to ensure the organization's survival. In Afghanistan, intelligence and U.S. Special Operations activities disrupted al Qa'ida, which became less cohesive and more decentralized among a range of foreign fighters. Al Qa'ida retained a minimal presence in Afghanistan, with perhaps less than 100 full-time fighters at any one time. This estimate is larger if one counts al Qa'ida-allied foreign fighter networks operating in Afghanistan.

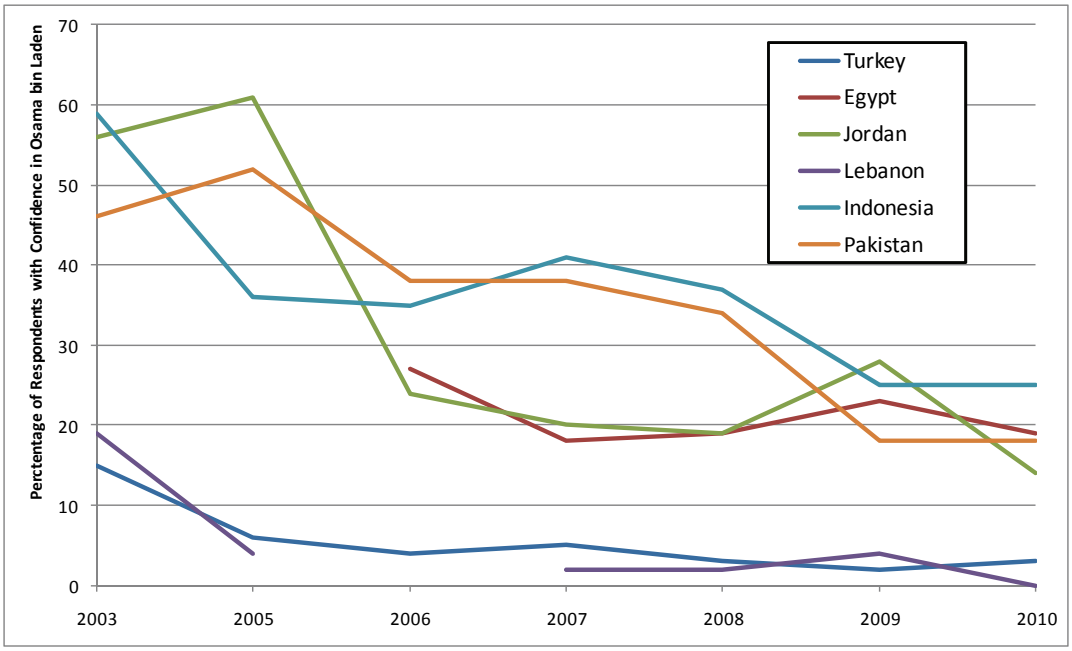
What does this fragile progress mean? For starters, the number of al Qa'ida operatives in Afghanistan and Pakistan shrunk from 2001 levels, where it was likely over 1,000 fighters. More importantly, however, Western efforts disrupted al Qa'ida's command and control, communications, morale, freedom of movement, and fund-raising activities. Central al Qa'ida was a weaker organization, though not defeated. The death of senior leaders also forced al Qa'ida to become increasingly reliant on couriers, hampered communication because of operational security concerns, delayed the planning cycle for operations, and exposed operations to interdiction.

V. Conclusion: A Long War

The landscape along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan, where al Qa'ida is largely headquartered, is strangely reminiscent of Frederick Remington or C.M. Russell's paintings of the American West. Gritty layers of dust sap the life from a parched landscape. With the exception of a few apple orchards, there is little agricultural activity because the soil is too poor. Several dirt roads snake through the area, but virtually none are paved. In this austere environment, central al Qa'ida has been disrupted. Its popularity was already declining before Osama bin Laden's death, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Poll of al Qa'ida[15]

How much confidence do you have in Osama bin Laden to do the right thing regarding world affairs?



Yet there are still several challenges. One is the absence of an effective campaign to counter al Qa'ida's extremist ideology. Public perceptions of al Qa'ida have plummeted. According to a 2010 public opinion poll published by the New America Foundation, more than three-quarters of residents in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas opposed the presence of al Qa'ida. A poll conducted by the Pew Research Center indicated that positive views of al Qa'ida have significantly declined across the Middle East and Asia between 2001 and 2010, including in Indonesia, Jordan, Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt, and Lebanon. In addition, there has been widespread opposition to al Qa'ida's ideology and tactics among conservative Islamic groups, especially al Qa'ida's practice of killing civilians. Public opposition of al Qa'ida, especially from legitimate Muslim religious leaders, needs to be better encouraged and publicized.

In addition, Pakistan has done a remarkable job against some militant groups in areas like Swat and northern parts of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, where scores of Pakistan army,

[15] Pew Research Center, *Obama More Popular Abroad Than at Home, Global Image of U.S. Continues to Benefit* (Washington, DC: Pew Global Attitudes Project, June 2010).

Frontier Corps, police, and intelligence units have died in combat. Yet Pakistan's continuing support to some militant groups, including Lashkar-e Tayyiba and the Haqqani Network, needs to end. Even more disturbing, both Lashkar-e Tayyiba and the Haqqani Network have a direct, senior-level relationship with some al Qa'ida leaders. Supporting militant groups has been deeply counter-productive to stability in South Asia – including in Pakistan – and has had second- and third-order effects that threaten the U.S. homeland.

The struggle against al Qa'ida and allied networks operating remains a long one. As Winston Churchill observed over a century ago during the British struggles in the Northwest Frontier, time in this area is measured in decades, not months or years. It's a concept that doesn't always come easy to Westerners. Still, a failure to adequately deal with al Qa'ida will not only prolong this struggle, but it will severely undermine on-going U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, risk the further destabilization of a nuclear Pakistan, and ultimately threaten the U.S. homeland.