TESTIMONY

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The Extremist Threat to the U.S. Homeland

Seth G. Jones

RAND Office of External Affairs

Seth G. Jones[1]
The RAND Corporation

The Extremist Threat to the U.S. Homeland[2]

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Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify at this hearing, "A False Narrative Endangers the Homeland."

There are a range of perspectives today on the threat to the United States from Islamic extremists. Some argue that al Qa'ida – especially core al Qa'ida – has been severely weakened, and there is no longer a major threat to the United States.[3] Former CIA operations officer Marc Sageman concludes that "al Qaeda is no longer seen as an existential threat to the West."[4] Some contend that the most acute threat to the United States comes from home grown terrorists.[5] Others maintain that al Qa'ida is resilient and remains a serious threat to the United States.[6] Finally, some claim that while the al Qa'ida organization established by Osama bin Laden is in decline, "al Qa'idism" – a decentralized amalgam of freelance extremist groups – is far from dead.[7]

Which of these arguments is right? This testimony argues that while the al Qai'da movement has become increasingly decentralized, there has been an *increase* in the number of Salafi-jihadist groups and followers over the past several years, particularly in North Africa and the Levant. Examples include groups operating in such countries as Tunisia, Algeria, Mali, Libya, Egypt

[3] James R. Clapper, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (Washington, DC: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, March 2013). Academic arguments include, for example, John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money: Balancing the Risks, Benefits, and Costs of Homeland Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
[4] Marc Sageman, "The Stagnation of Research on Terrorism," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 30, 2013. See the response to Sageman by John Horgan and Jessica Stern, "Terrorism Research Has Not Stagnated," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 8, 2013.
[5] Sageman, "The Stagnation of Research on Terrorism"; Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).
[6] Bruce Hoffman, "Al Qaeda's Uncertain Future," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 36, 2013, pp. 635-653; Bruce Riedel, "Al Qaeda is Back," *The Daily Beast*, July 26, 2013.
[7] Andrew Liepman and Philip Mudd, "Al Qaeda is Down. Al Qaedism Isn't," *CNN*, January 6, 2014. Accessed on January 12, 2014 at http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2014/01/06/al-Qaida-is-down-al-qaedism-isnt/.

(including the Sinai), Lebanon, and Syria. There has also been an *increase* in the number of attacks perpetrated by al Qa'ida and other Salafi-jihadist groups. While this trend is troubling, only some of these groups are currently targeting the U.S. homeland and its interests overseas like U.S. embassies and its citizens – a particular worry on the verge of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. The most concerning are al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula and inspired individuals like the 2013 Boston Marathon bombers, though the growing number of Western fighters traveling to Syria to fight against the Assad government presents a medium-term threat. These developments should cause serious concern among U.S. policymakers and, more broadly, the American population.

The rest of this testimony is divided into four sections. The first examines the organizational structure and capabilities of al Qa'ida and other Salafi-jihadist groups. The second section explores reasons for the resurgence of Salafi-jihadists. The third outlines implications of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, an important component of this hearing. And the final section outlines threats to the U.S. homeland and U.S. interests overseas.

The Organization and Capabilities of Salafi-Jihadists

Al Qa'ida and the broader Salafi-jihadist movement have become more decentralized over time. The unfortunate tendency among some journalists and pundits to lump all Islamic terrorists as "al Qa'ida" has clouded this debate. Consequently, I will focus on al Qa'ida and other Salafi-jihadists. Used in this context, Salafi-jihadists refer to individuals and groups – including al Qa'ida – that meet two criteria. First, they emphasize the importance of returning to a "pure" Islam, that of the Salaf, the pious ancestors. Second, they believe that violent jihad is *fard 'ayn* (a personal religious duty).[8] Salafi-jihadists consider violent jihad a permanent and individual duty.[9] Many Salafists are opposed to armed jihad and advocate the *da'wa* or "call" to Islam through proselytizing and preaching Islam. But Salafi-jihadists like al Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri support both Salafism *and* armed jihad.[10]

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[8] See, for example, bin Laden's fatwa published in the London newspaper *Al-Quds al-'Arabi* in February 1998, which noted that "to kill Americans is a personal duty for all Muslims." The text can be found at: http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/military/jan-june98/fatwa_1998.html.
[9] Gilles Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt: The Prophet and the Pharaoh*, translated by John Rothschild (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993); Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 41.
[10] On Salafi-jihadists, for example, Alain Grignard, "La littérature politique du GIA, des origines à Djamal Zitoun - Esquisse d'une analyse," in F. Dassetto, ed., *Facettes de l'Islam belge* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Academia-Bruylant, 2001). Also see Assaf Moghadam, "The Salafi-Jihad as a Religious Ideology," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (February 2008), pp. 14-16.

Today, this movement is increasingly decentralized among four tiers: (1) core al Qa'ida in Pakistan, led by Ayman al-Zawahiri; (2) a half dozen formal affiliates that have sworn allegiance to core al Qa'ida (located in Syria, Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, and North Africa); (3) a panoply of Salafi-jihadist groups that have not sworn allegiance to al Qa'ida, but are committed to establishing an extremist Islamic emirate; and (4) inspired individuals and networks.

1. Core Al Qa'ida: This tier includes the organization's leaders, most of whom are based in Pakistan. Al Qa'ida leaders refer to this broader area as Khurasan, a historical reference to the territory that included Persia, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and parts of northwestern Pakistan during the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates.[11] Core al Qa'ida is led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, but there are still a range of Americans in core al Qa'ida (such as Adam Gadahn) and operatives that have lived in America (such as Adnan el Shukrijumah). Al Qa'ida's senior leadership retains some oversight of the affiliates and, when necessary, may adjudicate disputes among affiliates or provide strategic guidance. But Zawahiri's challenges with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham highlight core al Qa'ida's limitations in enforcing its judgments. Around July 2013, Zawahiri took an unprecedented step by appointing Nasir al-Wuhayshi, the emir of al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, as his deputy, elevating the importance of Yemen for core al Qa'ida.

2. Affiliated Groups: The next tier includes affiliated groups that have become formal branches of al Qa'ida. What distinguishes "affiliates" from other types of Salafi-jihadist groups is the decision by their leaders to swear bay'at (allegiance) to al Qa'ida leaders in Pakistan. These organizations include Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) based in Iraq, al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) based in Yemen, al Shabaab based in Somalia, al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) based in Algeria and neighboring countries, and Jabhat al-Nusrah based in Syria. All of the groups became formal affiliates within the past decade: ISIS in 2004, initially as al Qa'ida in Iraq; AQIM in 2006; AQAP in 2009; al Shabaab in 2012; and Jabhat al-Nusrah in 2013 after breaking away from ISIS.[12]

Figure 1 highlights the number of attacks by al Qa'ida core and affiliates since 1998. The data indicate a substantial rise in the number of attacks over time. Most of these attacks have occurred in "near enemy" countries and against local targets. A further breakdown of the data shows that violence levels are highest in Yemen (from AQAP), Somalia (from al Shabaab), Iraq (from ISIS), and Syria (from ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusrah). These attacks include a mixture of suicide attacks,

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[11] See, for example, letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, May 2013.
[12] These dates refer to the year in which the affiliate publicly announced that their emirs had sworn bay'at to al Qa'ida central leaders.

complex attacks using multiple individuals and cells, assassinations, and various types of improvised explosive devices against local government targets and civilians.

Figure 1: Number of Attacks by Al Qa'ida and Affiliates, 1998-2012[13]
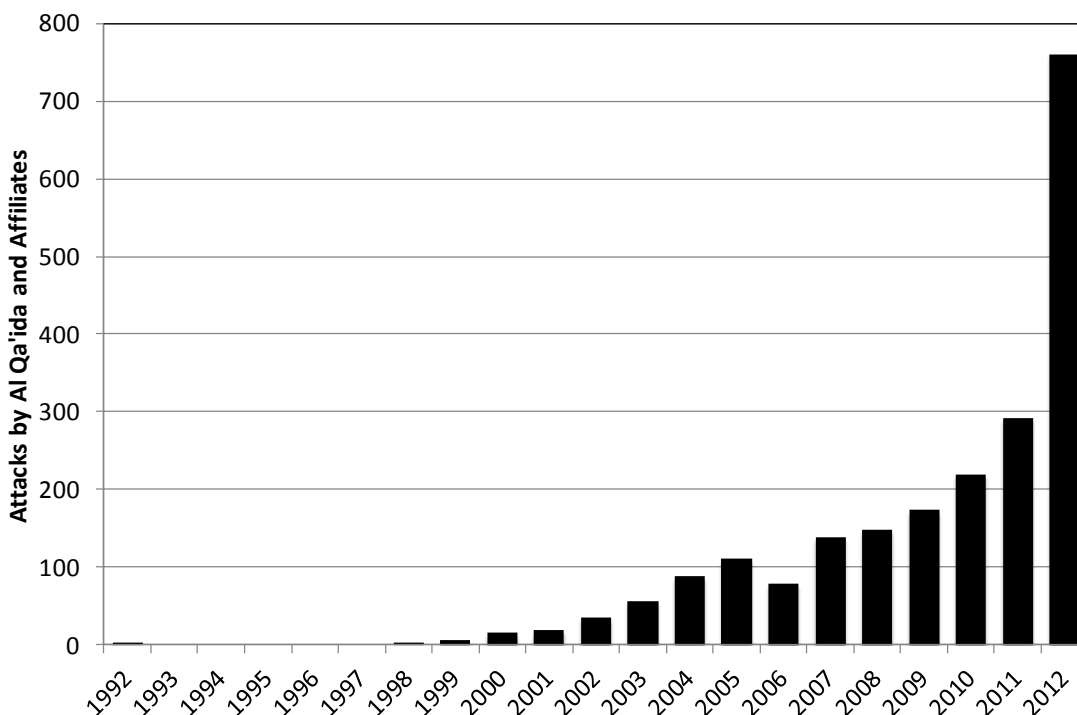
In Yemen, for example, AQAP retains a sanctuary in several governorates, including in southern Hadramawt, Shabwah, and Abyan along the Gulf of Aden – as well as around such cities as Rada' (in Al Bayda' governorate), Sana'a (Sana'a), Wadi Abidah (Ma'rib), and Yatamah (Al Jawf). The group has demonstrated an ability to mount large-scale, mass-casualty attacks across Yemen, especially in southern Yemen. AQAP has also benefited from limited Yemeni government operations. Since mid-2012, President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi has avoided major ground offensives in favor of airstrikes and small-scale raids against al Qa'ida sanctuaries, perhaps to minimize government casualties. On September 30, 2013, for instance, al Qa'ida operatives overran the military's regional headquarters in Mukallah, Hadramawt governorate, killing at least six. On September 20, al Qa'ida conducted a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device and small arms to attack military facilities in Shabwah Governorate, killing as many as 56 Yemeni security personnel. On December 5, al Qa'ida operatives launched a complex attack against the Yemeni Ministry of Defense complex in Sana'a, killing 40 Yemeni personnel and civilians, and

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[13] Data are from the Global Terrorism Database at the University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). Accessed on January 12, 2014, at www.start.umd.edu/gtd/.

wounding dozens more. They detonated a suicide vehicle bomb that breached a fence inside the compound, which allowed six or more militants to attack the military leadership hospital on the compound.[14] And on January 2, 2014, AQAP operatives were responsible for the assassination of a senior Yemeni security official in Aden. Most concerning, however, AQAP continues to plot attacks against the United States and American targets overseas.

3. Allied Groups: Next are a series of allied Salafi-jihadist groups, whose leaders have not sworn bay'at to core al Qa'ida in Pakistan. This arrangement allows these Salafi-jihadist 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. There are a substantial number of allied Salafi-jihadist groups across Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and the Caucasus. Perhaps most concerning, there has been an increase in the number, size, and activity of Salafi-jihadist groups in two areas: North Africa and the Levant. Examples include the Mohammad Jamal Network (Egypt), Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (Egypt), Mujahideen Shura Council (Egypt), Ansar al-Sharia Libya (Libya), al-Murabitun (Algeria and other countries), Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia (Tunisia), Harakat Ansar al-Din (Mali), and Boko Haram (Nigeria).

4. Inspired Individuals and Networks: The last tier includes 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 of Muslims in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Palestinian territory, and other countries. 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. Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the ringleader of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, was motivated by the extremist preaching of now-deceased al Qa'ida leader Anwar al-Awlaki, among others. Tsarnaev and his brother also used al Qa'ida propaganda materials, including an article from *Inspire* magazine, to build the bombs.[15] But many others were rudimentary and their half-baked plots would have been difficult to execute.

Why a Resurgence?

The rise in Salafi-jihadists groups has likely been caused by two factors. One is the growing weakness of governments across Africa and the Middle East, which has created an opportunity for Salafi-jihadist groups to secure a foothold. The logic is straightforward: weak governments

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[14] Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula's media arm, al-Malahim, released a Twitter statement on @shomokhalislam regarding the December 5, 2013, and other attacks. See also HIS Jane's, Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, December 2013, accessed Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism data base on December 19, 2013; "Al Qa'ida Claims Responsibility Over DOD Attack," *Yemen Post*, December 7, 2013.
[15] "Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom," *Inspire*, Issue 1, Summer 1431 (2010), pp. 31-40.

have difficulty establishing law and order, which permits militant groups and other sub-state actors to fill the vacuum.[16]

Governance, as used here, is defined as the set of institutions by which authority in a country is exercised.[17] It includes the ability to establish law and order, effectively manage resources, and implement sound policies. A large body of quantitative evidence suggests that weak and ineffective governance is critical to the onset of sub-state actors – including insurgent and terrorist groups. One study, for example, analyzed 161 cases over a 54-year period and found that financially, organizationally, and politically weak central governments render insurgencies more feasible and attractive due to weak local policing or inept counterinsurgency practices.[18] The reverse is also true: strong governance decreases the probability of insurgency. In looking at 151 cases over a 54-year period, one study found that governance is critical to prevent insurgencies, arguing that success requires the "provision of temporary security, the building of new institutions capable of resolving future conflicts peaceably, and an economy capable of offering civilian employment to former soldiers and material progress to future citizens."[19] In addition, governmental capacity is a negative and significant predictor of civil war, and between 1816 and 1997 "effective bureaucratic and political systems reduced the rate of civil war activity."[20]

There are good reasons to believe that weak governance has contributed to the rise of Salafi-jihadist groups. Since 2010, a year before the Arab uprisings, there has been a significant weakening of governance across the Middle East and North Africa, according to World Bank data. Levels of political stability dropped by 17 percent from 2010 to 2012, government effectiveness by 10 percent, rule of law by 6 percent, and control of corruption by 6 percent across the Middle East and North Africa.[21] Of particular concern, governance deteriorated in numerous countries that saw a rise in Salafi-jihadist groups. Take rule of law, which measures the extent to which agents have confidence in and abide by the rules of society, as well as the quality of contract enforcement, property rights, the police, and the courts, as well as the likelihood of crime and violence. Between 2010 and 2012, rule of law dropped by 21 percent in Egypt, 31 percent in Libya, 25 percent in Mali, 20 percent in Niger, 17 percent in Nigeria, 61 percent in

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[16] Ann Hironaka, *Neverending Wars: The International Community, Weak States, and the Perpetuation of Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005); James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, No. 1 (February 2003), pp. 75-90. On the importance of building institutions, see Roland Paris, *At War's End: Building Peace After Civil Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
[17] World Bank, *Governance Matters 2006: Worldwide Governance Indicators* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2006), p. 2.
[18] Fearon and Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," pp. 75-76.
[19] Michael W. Doyle and Nicholas Sambanis, *Making War and Building Peace* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 5.
[20] Hironaka, *Neverending Wars*, p. 45.
[21] World Bank, Worldwide Governance Indicators Data Set. Accessed December 16, 2013.

Syria, and 39 percent in Yemen. To make matters worse, most of the countries had low levels of rule of law even before this drop.[22] This decline appears to be, in part, a consequence of the uprisings.

A second factor is the spread of Salafi-jihadist militant networks within the Middle East and Africa. The logic is that operatives who have spent time training at al Qa'ida and other Salafi-jihadist camps or fighting in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya have moved to new countries in North Africa and the Levant and established Salafi-jihadist groups.

Individuals that spend time at training camps generally establish trusted social relationships.[23] Training camps provide a unique environment for terrorists to pray together, reinforcing their ideological views; share meals; train together in classrooms, at shooting ranges, and through physical conditioning; socialize with each other during breaks; and, after training is completed, sometimes fight together. Camps create and reinforce a shared religious identity and strategic culture dedicated to overthrowing infidel regimes.[24] For example, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who attempted to blow up an airplane landing in Detroit on Christmas Day 2009, attended an al Qa'ida training camp in the Shabwah region of Yemen. There were over two-dozen fighters who dug trenches, crawled through barbed wire, and practiced tactical movements such as clearing buildings. The daily routine at the training camp consisted of rising early, praying, reading the Qur'an, completing warm-up drills, and conducting tactical training. After lunch, the students completed additional tactical training drills and stayed in tents at night.[25] The social interaction during daily routines experienced by individuals like Abdulmutallab creates a strong bond among operatives.

The syllabi in many of these camps include theoretical and practical courses on weapons and explosives.[26] Individuals often study common religious texts in training camps, in addition to the Qu'ran and the hadiths.[27] Testimonies of former fighters suggest the camps foster a culture

[22] World Bank, Worldwide Governance Indicators Data Set. Accessed December 16, 2013.

[23] Thomas Hegghammer, "The Recruiter's Dilemma: Signaling and Rebel Recruitment Tactics," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (2012), pp. 3-16; Max Abrahms, "What Terrorists Really Want: Terrorist Motives and Counterterrorism Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Spring 2008), pp. 100-101.

[24] On identity and strategic culture see, for example, Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Peter J. Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

[25] See, for example, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab Comments, Training Video of Abdulmutallab, Al Malahim Media Foundation (al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula), Released in 2010.

[26] Rohan Gunaratna, "The Terrorist Training Camps of al Qaida," in James JF Forest, ed., *The Making of a Terrorist: Recruitment, Training and Root Causes* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), pp. 172–193.

[27] See, for example, the study of Sayyid Imam Abd al-Aziz al-Sharif's works in al Qa'ida camps. Muhammad Hasan Khalil al-Hakim, "Jihad Revisions: Truths and Presuppositions," June 11, 2007, posted on a jihadist website.

obsessed with weaponry.[28] Participants also engage in *nasheeds*, or battle hymns sung a capella during training and socializing. A similar component is poetry. Arab fighters in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, and Iraq composed new poems and recited them in the camps. Veterans are often familiar with this material and share it during social gatherings. Another aspect of jihad culture is telling war stories from the time of the Prophet Muhammad and his immediate successors.[29] In short, the socialization process in camps, and later on the battlefield, develops and strengthens social bonds.

While there is limited data on foreign fighter flows, there is some evidence that individuals from al Qa'ida and other Salafi-jihadist camps and battle fronts have migrated to the Middle East and North Africa.[30] In Syria, for example, Jabhat al-Nusrah leaders, including Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani, were veterans of the Iraq war and members of al Qa'ida in Iraq. Mohktar Belmokhtar, the emir of Al-Murabitun, split off from al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb in 2012 and had spent time in al Qa'ida training camps in Africa in the 1990s. In Egypt, Muhammad Jamal al-Kashif trained in Afghanistan in the late 1980s with al Qa'ida, where he learned to make bombs.[31] In Tunisia, Ansar al-Sharia's leader, Sayfallah Ben Hassine, spent considerable time at training camps in Afghanistan in the late 1990s and early 2000s, where he apparently met Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri.[32]

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[28] Omar Nasiri, *Inside the Jihad: My Life with Al Qaeda* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 2006). Also see the experiences of al Qa'ida operatives José Padilla and Najibullah Zazi. Declaration of Mr. Jeffrey N. Rapp, Director, Joint Intelligence Task Force for Combating Terrorism, submitted for the Court's consideration in the matter of José Padilla v. Commander C.T. Hanft, USN, Commander, Consolidated Naval Brig, Case Number 04-CV-2221-26AJ; United States of America v. Najibullah Zazi, United States District Court, Eastern District of New York, Docket No.: 09 CR 663 (S-1), Transcript of Criminal Cause for Pleading, February 22, 2010.

[29] Thomas Hegghammer, "The Recruiter's Dilemma: Signalling and Rebel Recruitment Tactics," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (2012), pp. 3-16; Omar Nasiri, *Inside the Jihad: My Life with Al Qaeda* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 2006).

[30] On the transnational movement of terrorists see, for example, Thomas Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 107, No. 1, February 2013, pp. 1-15; Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 3, 2011, pp. 53–94.

[31] United Nations, *Security Council Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Adds Two Entries to Its Sanctions List* (New York: United Nations, October 2013). Available at:
http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2013/sc11154.doc.htm

[32] U.S. Department of Defense, JTF-GTMO-CDR, MEMORANDUM FOR Commander, United States Southern Command, SUBJECT: Recommendation for Continued Detention Under DoD Control (CD) for Guantanamo Detainee, ISN US9TS-000510DP, September 15, 2008; U.S. Department of Defense, JTF-GTMO-CDR, MEMORANDUM FOR Commander, United States Southern Command, SUBJECT: Recommendation for Continued Detention Under DoD Control (CD) for Guantanamo Detainee, ISN US9TS-000502DP, June 22, 2007; Haim Malka and William Lawrence, *Jihadi-Salafism's Next Generation* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 2013).

Implications of the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan

The downsizing and potential exit of U.S. forces from Afghanistan – a focus of this hearing – could increase the terrorism problem from groups based in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. Al Qa'ida's global leadership is still located along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, though it has been weakened by persistent U.S. strikes. A civil war or successful Taliban-led insurgency would likely allow al Qa'ida and other terrorist groups such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, Haqqani network, and Lashkar-e-Taiba to increase their presence in Afghanistan. Most of these groups have already expanded their presence in Afghanistan over the past several years and have attempted to conduct attacks either against the U.S. homeland (such as al Qa'ida and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan), U.S. forces and U.S. government installations in Afghanistan (such as the Taliban and Haqqani network), or U.S. citizens in the region (such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and al Qa'ida). Several Central Asian groups – such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), and Jamaat Ansarullah (JA) – also could increase their presence in Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal.

Al Qa'ida leaders likely believe the U.S. drawdown will allow them more freedom of movement in provinces such as Kunar and Nuristan. Al Qa'ida's paramilitary commander and emir for northeastern Afghanistan, Faruq al-Qatari, is already attempting to expand al Qa'ida's footprint in the northeast.[33] Since al Qa'ida currently lacks the legitimacy and power to establish a sanctuary in Afghanistan and Pakistan on its own, it has attempted to leverage the capabilities of local militant networks like the Haqqani network. This symbiotic arrangement provides al Qa'ida some operational flexibility to access existing resources.

A burgeoning war could also increase regional instability as India, Pakistan, Iran, and Russia support a mix of Afghan central government forces, substate militias, and insurgent groups. Pakistan, in particular, would likely experience increasing violence and refugee flows if the war in Afghanistan spills over its border, as it did in the 1980s and 1990s. Growing conflict and radicalization in Pakistan, in turn, raises concerns about the security of its nuclear stockpile.[34] In short, a U.S. military departure from Afghanistan – if it were to happen – could foster a perception among some countries and organizations that the United States is not a reliable ally. Al Qa'ida and associated movements would likely view a withdrawal of U.S. military forces as their most important victory since the departure of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989 and provide inspiration to core al Qa'ida, affiliated groups, allied groups, and inspired individuals and networks.

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[33]Author interview with Western government officials, Afghanistan, September 2013.
[34]. Author interviews with Pakistan officials, Washington, September 2013.

The Threat to the United States

Not all Salafi-jihadist groups present a direct threat to the U.S. homeland. In the near term, Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula likely presents the most immediate threat, along with inspired individuals and networks like the Tsarnaev brothers that perpetrated the April 2013 Boston Marathon bombings. The growth in social media and the terrorist use of chat rooms, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other sites has facilitated radicalization inside the United States. While al Qa'ida leaders did not organize the Boston attacks, they played a key role by making available the propaganda material and bomb-making instructions utilized by the Tsarnaevs.

Other affiliates do not appear to pose an immediate threat to the U.S. homeland. Al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb is focused on overthrowing regimes in North Africa, including Algeria. Al Shabaab's objectives are largely parochial, and it has conducted attacks in Somalia and the region. But al Shabaab possesses a competent external operations capability to strike targets outside of Somalia. The Westgate Mall attack was well-planned and well-executed, and involved sophisticated intelligence collection, surveillance, and reconnaissance of the target. These skills could be used for other types of attacks directly targeting the United States and its citizens. In addition, Americans from cities like Phoenix and Minneapolis have traveled to Somalia over the past several years to fight with al Shabaab. Between 2007 and 2010, more than 40 Americans joined al Shabaab, making the United States a primary exporter of Western fighters to the al Qa'ida-affiliated group.[35] And the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, along with Jahbat al-Nusrah, are primarily interested in establishing Islamic emirates in Iraq, Syria, and the broader region.

Still, several Salafi-jihadist groups pose a threat to the United States overseas. Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, for instance, has planned attacks against U.S. diplomats and infrastructure in Tunis, including the U.S. embassy. Operatives from Ansar al-Sharia Libya, the Muhammad Jamal Network, and al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb were involved in the 2012 attack that killed U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens. Several Salafi-jihadist groups pose a threat to the forthcoming Sochi Winter Olympics, including Imirat Kavkaz based out of the North Caucasus and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

Other groups, like Jabhat al-Nusrah, could be a long-term threat. Jabhat al-Nusrah's access to foreign fighters, external network in Europe and other areas, and bomb-making expertise suggest that it may already have the capability to plan and support attacks against the West. There

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[35] Committee on Homeland Security, *Al Shabaab: Recruitment and Radicalization within the Muslim American Community and the Threat to the Homeland*, Majority Investigative Report (Washington, DC: U.S. House of Representatives, July 27, 2011), p. 2.

appears to be a growing contingent of foreign fighters – perhaps several thousand – traveling to Syria to fight in the war. A substantial portion of these fighters are coming from the region, including Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. Some have come from Chechnya. Others have apparently come from Afghanistan and Pakistan. But a significant number also appear to be coming from the West, especially from Belgium, France, and Sweden. Extremists have traveled to Syria from other European countries. According to Spanish officials, for example, a network based in Spain and Morocco sent approximately two dozen fighters to Jabhat al-Nusrah over the past year. It is unclear how many of these fighters have returned to the West, but some have apparently returned to Germany, Denmark, Spain, and Norway among others. In October 2012, authorities in Kosovo arrested the extremist Shurki Aliu, who had traveled from Syria to Kosovo and was involved in recruiting and providing material to Syrian opposition groups. A small number of Americans – perhaps less than a dozen – have apparently traveled to Syria to fight with the Syrian opposition.[36]

It is currently unclear whether most of these fighters will remain in Syria over the long run, move to other war zones such as North Africa, or return to the West. And even if some return, it is uncertain whether they will become involved in terrorist plots, focus on recruiting and fundraising, or become disillusioned with terrorism. Still, foreign fighters have historically been agents of instability. They can affect the conflicts they join, as they did in post-2003 Iraq by promoting sectarian violence and indiscriminate tactics. Perhaps more important, foreign fighter mobilizations empower transnational terrorist groups such as al Qa'ida, because volunteering for war is the principal stepping-stone for individual involvement in more extreme forms of militancy. When Muslims in the West radicalize, they usually do not plot attacks in their home country right away, but travel to a war zone first. A majority of al Qa'ida operatives began their militant careers as war volunteers, and most transnational jihadi groups today are by-products of foreign fighter mobilizations.[37]

Based on these developments, U.S. policymakers should be concerned about the number, size, and activity of al Qa'ida and other Salafi-jihadist groups. Some of these groups pose a direct threat to the U.S. homeland, embassies, and citizens overseas, while others are currently targeting local regimes. Still, an effective U.S. strategy needs to begin with an honest assessment of the problem.

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[36] Author interview with government officials from Europe and the Middle East, April and May 2013.
[37] Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 3, Winter 2010/11, pp. 53-94.