TESTIMONY

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The Extremist Threat to the U.S. Homeland

Addendum

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Addendum[2]

Before the Committee on Homeland Security
United States House of Representatives

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The subsequent questions and answers found in this document were received from the
Committee for additional information following the hearing on January 15, 2014 and were
submitted for the record.

POST-HEARING QUESTIONS FROM REPRESENTATIVE PAUL C. BROUN

QUESTION 1:

The first step of addressing any problem is to honestly identify it, yet this administration
repeatedly refuses to acknowledge the nature of our threat overseas and at home. From
Benghazi to Falluja, the Administration seems more focused on protecting their political message
than confronting the threats still posed by radical Islamic groups operating under the ideology of
Al Qaeda. Do you view this forced ignorance as a major threat to our security? Do you see any
way the Obama Administration will pivot towards a more honest foreign policy?

RESPONSE 1:

My current research and past counterterrorism experience in the U.S. Department of Defense
indicates that the threat from al Qa'ida and other Salafi-jihadist groups remains significant. The
number of Salafi-jihadist groups, fighters, and attacks has increased since 2010. Most of the
attacks are occurring in North Africa and the Middle East in such countries as Yemen, Somalia,
Iraq, and Syria. Indeed, the war in Syria has been the single most important attraction for Salafi-
jihadist fighters. This increase in Salafi-jihadist groups has likely been caused by weakening

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governments across North Africa and the Middle East, as well as the expansion of Salafi-jihadist operatives that have spent time at terrorist training camps, fought on jihadist battlefields, or been released or escaped from prison.

The threat posed by this diverse set of Salafi-jihadist groups varies widely. Some are locally focused and have shown little interest in attacking Western targets. Others, like al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, present a substantial threat to the U.S. homeland, along with inspired individuals like the Tsarnaev brothers that perpetrated the April 2013 Boston Marathon bombings. In addition, several Salafi-jihadist groups pose a medium-level threat because of their desire and ability to target U.S. citizens and structures overseas, including U.S. embassies. Examples include Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia, al Shabaab, the Muhammad Jamal Network, al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb, and the various Ansar al-Sharia groups in Libya. As explained below in response to the second question, there are significant risks in downplaying the threat from al Qa'ida and other groups plotting attacks against the U.S. homeland and U.S. interests abroad (such as embassies).

QUESTION 2:

Our national defense is one of the few areas the federal government SHOULD be spending money on according to the Constitution, yet many in the administration would like to preserve other, questionable spending in favor of cutting our defense. With the Asia Pivot and growing threats in the Middle East, is that position by the administration irresponsible?

RESPONSE 2:

It is vital that the United States retains a defense budget capable of defeating and deterring terrorist groups plotting attacks against the U.S. homeland and U.S. interests overseas. The trends noted above suggest that the United States needs to remain focused on countering the proliferation of Salafi-jihadist groups, despite the temptation to shift attention and resources to the Asia-Pacific region and to significantly decrease counterterrorism budgets in an era of fiscal constraint. The U.S. Department of Defense's 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review, for example, notes that the United States should be "principally focused on preparing for the future by rebalancing our defense efforts in a period of increasing fiscal constraint." It also emphasizes the importance of the Asia-Pacific region as "increasingly central to global commerce, politics and security."[3] Not surprisingly, much of the U.S. military – including the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps – is shifting its attention to the Asia-Pacific theater, including such issues as force

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[3] U.S. Department of Defense, Quadrennial Defense Review 2014 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2014), pp. IV, 4.

poster, acquisitions, campaign planning, and response anti-access area-denial (A2AD) challenges.

This rebalance entails risks, particularly if it involves decreasing attention and resources from countering the resurgence of al Qa'ida and other Salafi-jihadists in North Africa and the Middle East. For the near future, some of the most acute security threats to the U.S. homeland and its interests overseas will come from terrorist groups and state sponsors of terror in North Africa and the Middle East, not countries in the Asia-Pacific. To complicate matters, most U.S. government agencies involved in counterterrorism have not systematically apportioned or adequately synchronized their declining resources to focus on the most serious terrorism threats.

With the U.S. shift to Asia, it is important that the United States continue to provide sufficient resources and attention to North Africa and the Middle East for the use of special operations, intelligence, diplomatic, and other capabilities to conduct precision targeting of groups and their financial, logistical, and political support networks. The United States also needs to continue training, advising, and assisting local governments in their struggle against terrorism. For the foreseeable future, the United States will need to orchestrate covert raids to capture or kill terrorists, seize their supplies, and target their finances; conduct air strikes from drones, fixed-wing aircraft, and helicopters; oversee psychological operations to undermine terrorist support; collect and analyze intelligence about terrorist groups (their networks, locations, capabilities, and intentions); and engage with tribal and other local actors.

POST-HEARING QUESTIONS FROM REPRESENTATIVE RICHARD HUDSON

QUESTION 1:

My subcommittee oversees the Transportation Security Administration, so I know all too well, from classified meetings and briefings, just how real the threats are to our transportation systems. TSA Administrator John Pistole has stated publicly that terrorists are developing more sophisticated ways of smuggling explosives onto U.S.-bound aircraft from overseas through advanced designs and concealment methods. In 2012, we thwarted an attack by AQAP so to me it's clear the terrorists are making progress. The question I think we need to ask ourselves is – are we one-step ahead or one-step behind?

RESPONSE 1:

Whether we are one step ahead or one step behind depends, in part, on the issue. According to several documents found in Osama bin Laden's Abbotabad residence, some senior al Qa'ida leaders were frustrated about the difficulties in smuggling operatives into the United States because of improvements in U.S. border security, intelligence collection and analysis, and data bases such as the No Fly List. However, terrorists – including al Qa'ida and its affiliates – continue to innovate. In Somalia, al Shabaab has explored the possibility of concealing bombs inside consumer electronic items, such as laptop computers, cameras, and tape recorders. And al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula bomb makers continue their efforts to build improvised explosive devices using components that may not be detected by airport screeners.

Perhaps most concerning, al Qa'ida is a different organization than it was a decade ago – a development that some officials have not fully appreciated. The broader Salafi-jihadist movement has become more decentralized among four tiers: (1) core al Qa'ida in Pakistan, led by Ayman al-Zawahiri; (2) formal affiliates that have sworn allegiance (or bayat) to core al Qa'ida (located in Syria, 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. Using the state of core al Qa'ida in Pakistan as a gauge of the group's strengths (or weaknesses) – as some have done – is increasingly anachronistic. Overall, I am concerned that the United States is one step *behind* in understanding the nature of the threat from a heterogeneous and decentralized movement.

QUESTION 1A:

In your assessment, are our homeland security efforts adequately adapting resources, technology and manpower to counter the ever-changing threats to transportation security?

RESPONSE 1A:

I have not done a thorough analysis of whether – and how much – U.S. homeland security efforts are adequately adapting resources, technology, and manpower to counter the evolving threats to transportation security. However, other RAND researchers have examined various aspects of transportation security.[4] One of the biggest gaps in U.S. homeland security efforts is the absence

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[4] See, for example, Andrew R. Morral, et al., *Modeling Terrorism Risk to the Air Transportation System: An Independent Assessment of TSA's Risk Management Analysis Tool and Associated Methods* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2012); Brian Michael Jenkins, *Aviation Security: After Four Decades, It's Time for a Fundamental Review* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2012); Kevin Jack Riley, *Air Travel Since 9/11* (Santa

of a veritable counterterrorism *strategy*. A strategy refers to a plan to defeat or degrade terrorist groups. Government officials need to consider how to use their military, law enforcement, diplomatic, financial, and other tools against terrorist groups. The British government, for example, has a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy referred to as CONTEST, which covers transportation and other types of security. It is based on four areas of work: pursue (to stop terrorist attacks); prevent (to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism); protect (to strengthen our protection against a terrorist attack); and prepare (to mitigate the impact of a terrorist attack). While the United States does have a *National Strategy for Counterterrorism* in name, it does not offer a veritable plan for how to combine resources, technology, manpower, and other key ingredients to defeat terrorist groups.[5] This is a notable gap in countering the ever-changing threats to transportation and other types of security.

QUESTION 1B:

Does the Obama Administration's narrative help or hurt in this regard?

RESPONSE 1B:

My current research and past counterterrorism experience in the U.S. Department of Defense indicates that the threat from al Qa'ida and other Salafi-jihadist groups remains significant. According to my analysis, the number of Salafi-jihadist groups, fighters, and attacks has increased since 2010. Approximately 98 percent of the attacks are occurring against local targets, particularly in North Africa and the Middle East. Examples include groups operating in Tunisia, Algeria, Mali, Libya, Egypt (including the Sinai), Lebanon, and Syria. In fact, the war in Syria has been the single most important attraction for Salafi-jihadist fighters.

More broadly, the United States lacks a coherent narrative to combat the narrative of al Qa'ida and other Salafi-jihadists. In 1999, the State Department disbanded the U.S. Information Agency, which played a prominent role in countering Soviet ideology during the Cold War. Today, no U.S. government agency has the lead role for countering the ideology of al Qa'ida and its broader movement. The State Department has the lead for public diplomacy, including through such organizations as the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications. But the State Department has not developed – nor has the mandate for – a comprehensive inter-agency strategy to counter al Qa'ida's ideology. The CIA is involved in some clandestine activity, but most senior officials do not view undermining al Qa'ida's ideology as its core mission. The

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Monica, CA: RAND, 2011); Brian A. Jackson, *Efficient Aviation Security: Strengthening the Analytic Foundation for Making Air Transportation Security Decisions* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2012).
[5] White House, *National Strategy for Counterterrorism* (Washington, DC: White House, June 2011).

Department of Defense is also involved in some efforts, but they are dispersed among U.S. Central Command, U.S. Special Operations Command, and other organizations. Ultimately, it is the President and the National Security Staff's responsibility to appoint a lead agency and hold it responsible. An effective campaign has to be done carefully, covertly, and led by credible Muslims in these countries. In the end, the struggle against the al Qa'ida movement will be long – measured in decades, not months or years. Much like the Cold War, it is also predominantly an ideological struggle.

QUESTION 1C:

What suggestions do you have that will help us stay flexible and adaptive in our approach to protecting our aviation systems?

RESPONSE 1C:

The recent tragedy with Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 highlights the need to improve passport security, with two passengers that boarded the flight using stolen passports. Both of the stolen passports had been on Interpol's Stolen and Lost Travel Documents (SLTD) database, but the airport and airline staff failed to make the necessary checks. This is a gaping loophole for terrorist organizations and poses a threat to Americans traveling overseas. Interpol created its Stolen and Lost Travel Documents database in 2002, and it now contains more than 40 million records. The SLTD database is available to Interpol's 190 member states, but only a few countries systematically search the database – such as the United States, United Kingdom, and United Arab Emirates. According to Interpol, passengers were able to board planes more than a billion times in 2013 without having had their passports screened.[6] Additional measures are being made to enhance passport security such as the installation of chip and fingerprints in the documents, but it is still a vulnerable system. The United States should take the lead in encouraging and assisting other governments in fixing these loopholes.

In addition, one of the most important steps to protecting U.S. aviation systems is to ensure U.S. intelligence agencies are providing U.S. government agencies dedicated to protecting U.S. aviation systems with sufficient information about the types of plots and improvised explosive devices being developed – or considered – by terrorist groups.

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[6] Mike Hills, "Mystery of Flight MH370 Raises Fears of Passport Fraud," *BBC*, March 11, 2014.

QUESTION 2:

How would you describe the command and control from al-Qaeda in Pakistan, led by Zawahiri, over al-Qaeda ideologically aligned groups such as AQAP, ISIL, al-Shabaab, Ansar al Sharia, etc.? Specifically how are we adapting our procedures, intelligence gathering methods, and resources to ensure we're infiltrating and collecting accurate information on these smaller, decentralized, localized groups?

RESPONSE 2:

Al Qa'ida's command and control is increasingly decentralized. Core al Qa'ida includes the organization's leaders, most of which are based in Pakistan. Al Qa'ida's senior leadership retains some oversight of the affiliates and, when necessary, may attempt to adjudicate disputes among affiliates or provide strategic guidance. But Zawahiri's failure to mediate the dispute between Jabhat al-Nusrah and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham highlights core al Qa'ida's limitations.[7] However, the U.S. government needs to better adapt its procedures, intelligence gathering methods, and resources to an expanding number of Salafi-jihadist groups. Most U.S. government agencies involved in counterterrorism have not systematically apportioned or adequately synchronized their declining resources to focus on the most serious terrorism threats.

QUESTION 3:

What impact to our Homeland do you see from a complete withdrawal from Afghanistan?

RESPONSE 3:

A complete U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan could seriously jeopardize U.S. security interests because of the continuing presence of al Qa'ida and other terrorist groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan. U.S. forces would have little or no mandate and limited or no capabilities after 2015 to assist the Afghan government if the Taliban or other groups associated with al Qa'ida threatened to overrun a major city or even topple the government. A U.S. withdrawal would also increase the probability that Afghanistan would be used as a beachhead for al Qa'ida and other militant groups. Iraq after the U.S. withdrawal is illustrative: al Qa'ida in Iraq has regrouped since 2011. It conducts attacks at a high tempo and was instrumental in establishing an affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusrah, in Syria.

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[7] See, for example, Qaedat al-Jihad Organization – General Command, "Statement Regarding the Relationship of the Group of Qaedat al-Jihad with the Group of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham," various jihadist forums, February 2014.

A civil war or successful Taliban-led insurgency would likely allow al Qaeda 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 conducted attacks either against the U.S. homeland (al Qa'ida and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan), U.S. forces and U.S. government installations in Afghanistan (Taliban and Haqqani network), or U.S. citizens in the region (Lashkar-e-Taiba and al-Qaeda).

In addition, al Qa'ida and associated movements would likely view the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Afghanistan as their most important victory since the departure of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989.

QUESTION 4:

Prior to the September 11, 2012 attack on our consulate in Benghazi, there was a great deal of reporting that al-Qaeda ideologically aligned groups were operating in and around Benghazi. Why do you think that Administration did not see those groups as a significant threat to United States operations in the area?

RESPONSE 4:

Prior to the September 2012 attack in Benghazi, U.S. government agencies had warned of terrorist activity in the area, including from groups like Ansar al-Sharia Libya, al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb, and the Muhammad Jamal Network. Going forward, as some RAND work has concluded, the security plan for the U.S. diplomatic presence abroad must include well-developed strategies to both detect and prevent an assault like the one in Libya before it occurs.[8] Technology, for example, can help. Cameras with pattern-recognition software positioned around the embassy to monitor the streets can show what those streets look like on a normal day and what they look like on a day when there may be protests or an attack. They can capture protesters mobilizing or attackers prepositioning themselves before an assault. Similarly, predictive analytics can be applied to social media collected from Facebook, Twitter, and other accounts to determine when crowds might form or when an attack is being planned.

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[8] William Young, *Embassy Security: From the Outside In* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2013).