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Counterterrorism and the Role of Special Operations Forces

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RAND Office of External Affairs

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Testimony presented before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Non-Proliferation, and Trade on April 8, 2014

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The RAND Corporation

Counterterrorism and the Role of Special Operations Forces²

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

April 8, 2014

Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Sherman, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify at this hearing, "Is al-Qaeda Winning? Grading the Administration's Counterterrorism Policy." I have been asked to focus my written remarks on the nature of the terrorism threat and the role of U.S. special operations forces. Consequently, I have divided my comments into threat sections. The first provides an overview of the evolving terrorism threat. The second section examines the role of special operations forces. And the third offers brief conclusions.

A Persistent Threat

Based on current trends, the United States will likely face a persistent threat from terrorist groups operating in such regions as North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. Of particular concern is the threat from al Qa'ida and other Salafi-jihadist groups.³ Groups that are Salafi-jihadist generally meet two criteria. First, the group emphasizes the importance of returning to a "pure" Islam, that of the Salaf, the pious ancestors. Second, the group believes that violent jihad is *fard 'ayn* (a personal religious duty).⁴ *Fard 'ayn* includes tasks every Muslim is required to perform, such as *zakat* (almsgiving), *hajj* (the pilgrimage to Mecca), *salat* (daily prayers), *sawm* (fasting during Ramada), and the *shahada* (accepting Muhammad as God's messenger).⁵ Jihad is not one of these five pillars. It is, instead, a collective duty

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

² This testimony is available for free download at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT408.html>.

³ While non-Salafi-jihadist groups like Hezbollah are a threat, the focus of this hearing is on al Qa'ida and its allies.

⁴ 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.

⁵ On Sayyid Qutb's interpretation of armed jihad as a duty, see Sayyid Qutb, *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq [Milestones]*, Reprint Edition (New Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 2007).

(*fard kifaya*) under certain circumstances. Most Salafi-jihadists consider violent jihad an individual duty, or *fard 'ayn*.⁶ Ayman al-Zawahiri, among others, has emphasized both Salafism *and* armed jihad.⁷

There are a number of concerning trends regarding Salafi-jihadist groups. First, the number of Salafi-jihadist groups and fighters has increased after 2010. Examples include groups operating in Tunisia, Algeria, Mali, Libya, Egypt (including the Sinai Peninsula), Lebanon, and Syria. There has also been an increase in the number of attacks perpetrated by al Qa'ida and its affiliates. These trends suggest that the United States – including special operations forces – need to remain focused on countering al Qa'ida and other Salafi-jihadist groups, which have started to resurge in some parts of North Africa and the Middle East.

Second, 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 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 the core in Pakistan as a gauge of al Qa'ida's strengths (or weaknesses) is increasingly anachronistic for such a heterogeneous movement. In addition, while there are some similarities among Salafi jihadists, there are also substantial differences. Salafi-jihadist leaders and groups often disagree about how much, if at all, to target Western countries and their citizens; the size and global nature of their desired emirate; and their willingness to attack Shi'a. This decentralized structure creates substantial vulnerabilities for al Qa'ida and other Salafi-jihadist groups.

Third, the threat posed by this diverse set of groups varies widely. As I just mentioned, some are locally focused and have shown little interest in attacking Western targets. Others, like al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, present an immediate threat to the U.S. homeland, along with inspired individuals like the Tsarnaev brothers – the perpetrators of 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 facilities 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.

⁶ 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.

⁷ On the term Salafi-jihadists see, for example, Assaf Moghadam, "Motives for Martyrdom: Al-Qaida, Salafi Jihad, and the Spread of Suicide Attacks," *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 3, Winter 2008/2009, pp. 46–78; Moghadam, "The Salafi-Jihad as a Religious Ideology," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 1, No. 3, February 2008, pp. 14–16. Also see Alain Grignard, "La littérature politique du GIA, des origines à Djamel Zitoun - Esquisse d'une analyse," in F. Dassetto, ed., *Facettes de l'Islam belge*, Louvain-la-Neuve: Academia-Bruylant, 2001.

As Table 1 illustrates, al Qa’ida and other Salafi-jihadist groups can be divided into three categories: those that pose a high threat because they are involved in active plotting against the U.S. homeland; those that pose a medium threat because they are involved in plotting attacks against U.S. structures (such as embassies) and U.S. citizens overseas; and those that pose a low threat because they are focused on targeting local regimes or other countries.

Table 1: Examples of Salafi-Jihadist Groups and Threats to the U.S.

	High Threat	Medium Threat	Low Threat
<i>Characteristics</i>	Active plotting against the U.S. homeland and U.S. targets overseas (e.g. U.S. embassies and citizens)	Active plotting against U.S. targets overseas (e.g. U.S. embassies and citizens)	Limited or no active plotting against U.S. targets overseas
<i>Examples</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Al Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula • Core al Qa’ida • Some inspired individuals and networks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Al Shabaab • Ansar al-Sharia Libya • Muhammad Jamal Network • Al Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • East Turkestan Islamic Movement • Suqor al-Sham

The highest threat likely comes from al Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula, which retains a capability and desire to target the U.S. homeland and U.S. interests overseas. Several Yemen-based operatives – such as leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi, senior military commander Qasim al-Rimi, and senior official Ibrahim al-Banna – continue to support attacks against the United States. Core al Qa’ida also presents a threat because of its interest in targeting the U.S. homeland, led by individuals such as external operations chief Abdullah al-Shami. But core al Qa’ida leaders have had difficulty recruiting – or even inspiring – competent operatives in the West.⁸ In an effort to reach out to Western jihadis, the first edition in 2014 of core al Qa’ida’s magazine, *Resurgence*, was dedicated to radicalizing Westerners and encouraging independent attacks in the West. A small number of inspired individuals, like the Tsarnaev brothers, who perpetrated the April 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, also pose a threat. 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.

Several Salafi-jihadist groups pose a medium-level threat because of their interest in and capability to target U.S. citizens and installations overseas. Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia, for instance, has planned attacks against U.S. diplomats and infrastructure in Tunis, including the U.S. embassy. Several groups with a presence in Libya – such as Ansar al-Sharia Libya, the Muhammad Jamal Network, and al Qa’ida in the

⁸ Brian Michael Jenkins, *Stray Dogs and Virtual Armies: Radicalization and Recruitment to Jihadist Terrorism in the United States Since 9/11* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2011).

Islamic Maghreb – also pose a threat. 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.⁹ These skills could be used for other types of attacks directly targeting the United States facilities and citizens overseas. In addition, some Americans have traveled to Somalia over the past several years to fight for al Shabaab, though these numbers have apparently dropped in recent years.¹⁰ Several al Shabaab leaders, including deputy leader Ma hat Karate and Jihad Serwan Mostafa (a U.S. citizen), have allegedly been interested in targeting Western and U.S. interests in the region.¹¹

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, along with Jabhat al-Nusrah, are primarily interested in establishing Islamic emirates in Iraq, Syria, and the broader region. But the network of Salafi-jihadist groups in Syria could pose a growing threat in the future. 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, support, and conduct attacks against the West. There appears to be a growing contingent of foreign fighters – over ten thousand – traveling to Syria to fight in the war. A significant number – perhaps 10 to 15 percent (roughly 1,000 to 1,500 fighters) – appear to be coming from Europe, especially from Belgium, France, and Sweden. Security agencies from such European countries as France, Belgium, Germany, Netherlands, United Kingdom, and the Balkans have arrested fighters departing to, or returning from, Syria. It is currently unclear whether most of these fighters will remain in Syria and other battlefields 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.¹²

Finally, some Salafi-jihadist groups present a low-level threat to the United States. They do not possess the capability or intent to target the United States at home or overseas. They include such groups as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which is primarily interested in Chinese targets. Despite this categorization, there is some fluidity between levels. And more broadly, the terrorist threat to the United States will likely persist.

⁹ On Westgate see *United States Army, Case Study: Terrorist Attack on Westgate Mall, Nairobi, Kenya: 21-24 September 2013* (Washington, DC: United States Army, 2014); Kevin Yorke, *Analysis of Al-Shabaab's Attack at the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya* (New York: New York City Police Department, 2013).

¹⁰ Committee on Homeland Security, *Al Shabaab: Recruitment and Radicalization within the Muslim American Community and the Threat to the Homeland*, Majority Investigative Report (Washington, D.C.: U.S. House of Representatives, July 27, 2011), p. 2.

¹¹ See, for example, Jihad Serwad Mostafa, Rewards for Justice, U.S. Department of Justice. Available at: <http://www.rewardsforjustice.net/index.cfm?page=mostafa&language=english>. Accessed on January 22, 2014.

¹² Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 3, 2011, pp. 53–94.

The Role of Special Operations Forces

Based on this persistent threat, an effective U.S. counterterrorism strategy needs to involve a range of military, intelligence, financial, law enforcement, diplomatic, and other tools from across the U.S. government. The U.S. State Department, intelligence community, Department of Justice, Department of Treasury, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Defense, and other U.S. federal, state, and local agencies are pivotal. Nonetheless, special operations forces can play an important role in several areas.

Partner Capacity and Foreign Internal Defense: One is building partner capacity and supporting foreign internal defense, which includes a variety of activities like security force assistance and developing professional, capable, and sustainable foreign security forces.¹³ Special operations forces are trained to work “by, with, and through” partner forces, which generally makes them the provider of choice for building partner capacity. They are also trained to understand local culture, society, language, economy, history, and politics. For counterterrorism purposes, building partner capacity can involve deploying U.S. Army Special Forces and other units to train, advise, and assist local security forces and build the capacity of local governments to provide services, secure their populations, and deal with the causes of terrorism in their countries. A number of countries threatened by Salafi-jihadist groups in North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia could benefit from U.S. or other outside training and assistance. This is particularly true in cases where the weakness of the local government makes it desirable to prevent the terrorist threat from worsening. One example is Somalia, where al Shabaab has not plotted attacks against the U.S. homeland, though it has conducted attacks in neighboring countries and includes operatives like Abdikadir Mohammad (or “Ikrima”) that have plotted attacks against U.S. targets overseas. Somalia has one of the weakest governments in the world, ranking as the worst-performing government in five of six categories in the World Bank’s governance indicators.¹⁴ In addition, foreign militaries participating in the African Union Mission in Somalia could use assistance from the special operations forces, such as additional equipment and financial support, to conduct offensive operations in al Shabaab’s strongholds in southern Somalia.

Figure 2 provides a rough illustration of the strategic challenge. The y-axis measures the capacity of local governments to establish the rule of law in their countries, using data from the World Bank. The x-axis measures the terrorist threat to the United States, using author estimates.¹⁵ The bottom right-hand

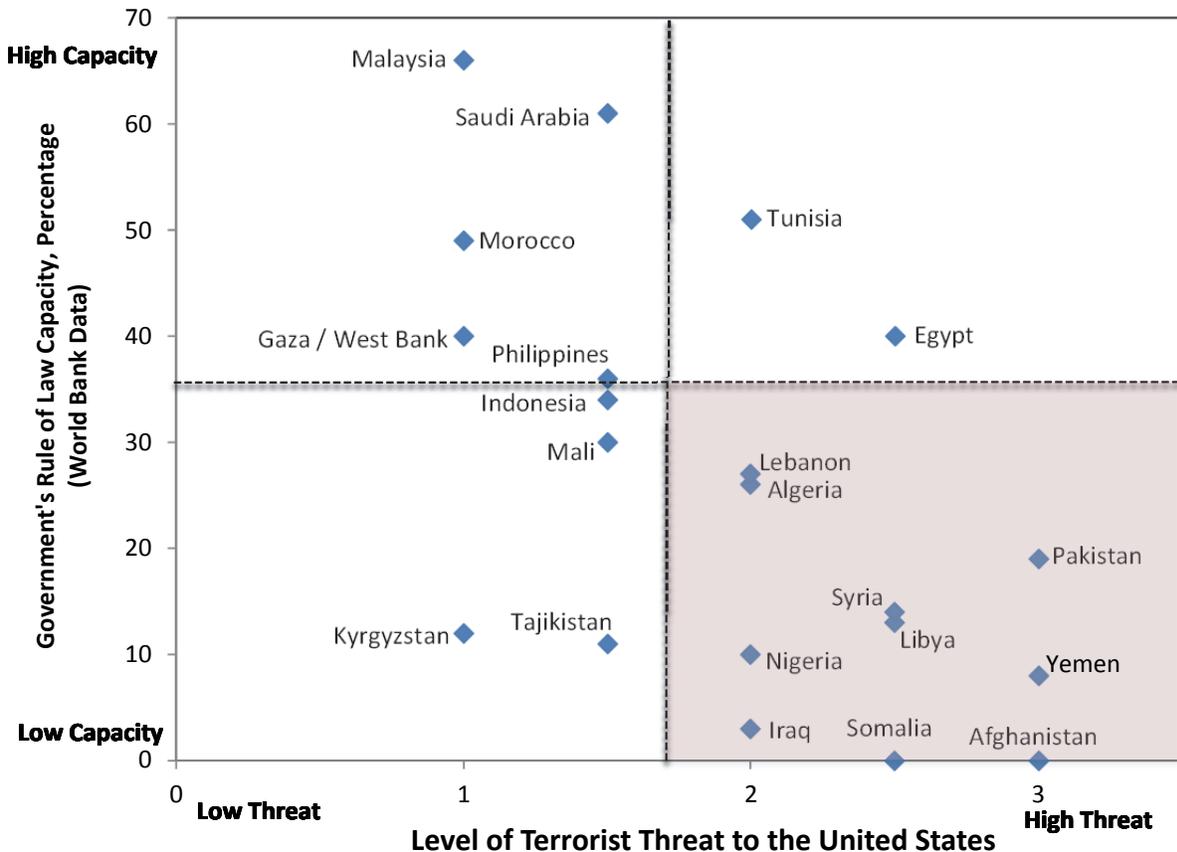
¹³ On foreign internal defense see U.S. Department of Defense, *Foreign Internal Defense, Joint Publication 3-22* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, July 12, 2010).

¹⁴ The data are for 2012. World Bank, *Worldwide Governance Indicators Data Set*, accessed January 8, 2014.

¹⁵ Countries were coded according to the following qualitative criteria for groups operating there. Score of 3.0: Group engaged in active plotting attacks against the U.S. homeland and U.S. target overseas (such as embassies); Score of

quadrant indicates the countries where there is a high terrorist threat and low government capacity. The data suggest that the most concerning countries for the United States include Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen, where there is a high potential threat to the United States and limited local rule of law. There are another set of troubling countries in the lower right-hand quadrant – such as Somalia, Iraq, Syria, Libya – with a medium Salafi-jihadist threat to the United States (including to U.S. interests overseas) and weak local governance.

Figure 2: Countries of Concern for the United States



But there are risks with building partner capacity and foreign internal defense. First, local governments can be fickle and uncooperative. A government that is willing to target Salafi-jihadist groups at one point can change its assessment. Pakistan, for example, was more willing to target al Qa’ida operatives on its soil in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 than it is today. Governments can also collapse. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, whose regime effectively countered terrorist groups, was overthrown

2.5: Group engaged in limited plotting against the U.S. homeland, but active plotting against U.S. targets overseas; Score of 2.0: Group not engaged in plotting against the U.S. homeland, but active plotting against U.S. targets overseas; Score of 1.5: Group not engaged in plotting against the U.S. homeland, but limited plotting against U.S. targets overseas; Score of 1.0: No groups involved in serious plots against the U.S. homeland or U.S. targets overseas.

in 2011 during the Arab uprisings. Second, U.S. participation risks emboldening the Salafi-jihadist narrative. Third, combating terrorist and insurgent groups is difficult, especially in countries with weak governments. There is no guarantee that building the capacity of local partners will weaken or defeat terrorist groups.

Despite these risks, special operations forces can bolster the capacity of local governments in cases where there is a terrorism threat to the United States and limited local capacity.

Direct Action and Unconventional Warfare: Special operations forces can also be critical in precision targeting of terrorist groups and their financial, logistical, and political support networks. They can orchestrate covert raids to capture or otherwise target terrorists, seize their supplies, and undermine 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.¹⁶ In countries that are hostile to the United States but have groups that pose a threat – such as Iran (where there are some al Qa’ida operatives) and Syria (where there are a range of Salafi-jihadist groups) – U.S. engagement may be limited to such options as unconventional warfare or covert action by intelligence operatives or special operations forces acting under Title 50 authority.¹⁷ Unconventional warfare includes activities to enable a resistance to coerce, disrupt, or undermine a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area.

Special operations forces are critical since the U.S. deployment of conventional forces to fight terrorists overseas has generally been counterproductive.¹⁸ In Iraq, for instance, the large U.S. presence contributed to radicalization. In general, large numbers of U.S. forces tend to facilitate Salafi-jihadist recruitment and propaganda efforts. Perhaps more importantly, most successful overseas operations against al Qa’ida operatives in the past decade – such as against Khalid Sheikh Mohammad in Pakistan in 2003, Abu Mus’ab al Zaraqawi in Iraq in 2006, Osama bin Laden in Pakistan 2011, and Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen in 2011 – were perpetrated by clandestine U.S. intelligence units and special operations forces. And most of the terrorists involved in serious homeland plots after September 11, 2001 – from José

¹⁶ Depending on a Salafi-jihadist group’s organizational structure, capabilities, support base, and other factors, an engagement strategy might involve decapitation (catching or killing the group’s leadership), negotiations, or other options. On how terrorist groups end see, for example, Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qa’ida* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008).

¹⁷ As outlined in the National Security Act of 1947, covert action refers to “an activity or activities of the United States Government to influence political, economic, or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the United States Government will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly.” See National Security Act of 1947, Section 503e. In addition, Title 50 of the U.S. Code allows the U.S. military to conduct covert action under a CIA-run operation. See United States Code, Title 50: War and National Defense, Section 413.

¹⁸ Barry R. Posen, “Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 1, January / February 2013, pp. 116-128.

Padilla's plan to blow up apartment buildings in the United States and Hasan's mass shooting at Fort Hood to Najibullah Zazi and Faisal Shahzad's respective plots to conduct terrorist attacks in New York City – were motivated, in part, by the deployment of large numbers of U.S. combat troops in Muslim countries and by a conviction, however erroneous, that Muslims were its helpless victims.¹⁹

Still, there are risks with direct action and unconventional warfare. First, they can embolden the narrative of Salafi-jihadist groups, who will invariably attempt to portray the conflict as one between Islam and infidel countries. Direct U.S. participation will likely become public, despite efforts to keep it clandestine. Some in the United States may also balk at direct engagement in a foreign war. Second, there is a potential for blowback. In cases where Salafi-jihadist groups are not interested in targeting the U.S. homeland or its embassies, U.S. strikes against the group could cause a change in their behavior. After the 2009 U.S. killing of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) leader Baitullah Mehsud, for example, the TTP became increasingly interested in targeting the United States. In May 2010, Faisal Shahzad attempted to detonate a car bomb in Times Square, New York City, after being trained by TTP leaders in Pakistan.

In addition, the United States has utilized drone strikes against some terrorist groups. But there are limitations to using armed drones for direct action missions. There is mixed evidence, at best, that drone strikes and broader decapitation strategies alone are effective.²⁰ Groups can survive a strike when they establish – or shift to – a more decentralized leadership structure, possess an ideology that still has followers, or are able to appoint competent replacements for leaders that have been killed. In addition, successful counterterrorism and counterinsurgency campaigns generally require the local government to control territory using its security forces.

But the benefits of direct action and unconventional warfare outweigh the risks in most cases where Salafi-jihadist groups are *already* plotting attacks against the U.S. homeland and its interests overseas (such as U.S. embassies), especially where the local government has minimal capabilities or little political will to counter the groups. One example is Yemen, where al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula has been involved in multiple plots against the U.S. homeland and U.S. embassies, but whose government is relatively weak and embroiled in several domestic insurgencies and political unrest. Beginning in the summer of 2012, Yemeni President Abd Rabuh Mansur Hadi became increasingly cautious about conducting operations against al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula to minimize government casualties. He avoided large-scale ground offensives in favor of airstrikes against al Qa'ida safe havens, including its

¹⁹ Seth G. Jones, *Hunting in the Shadows: The Pursuit of Al Qa'ida Since 9/11* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012).

²⁰ Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Jenna Jordan, "When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation," *Security Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4, December 2009, pp. 719-755; Stephen T. Hosmer, *Operations against Enemy Leaders* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001). On the effectiveness of drones see Patrick B. Johnston, "Does Decapitation Work? Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Targeting in Counterinsurgency Campaigns," *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 4, Spring 2012, pp. 47-49.

stronghold in Mahfad District, Abyan governorate. In addition, the Yemeni military was fraught with problems. Many rank-and-file Yemeni soldiers did not receive their full pay because of endemic corruption in the military, undermining the military's effectiveness in countering al Qa'ida.

In these cases, a U.S. failure to directly engage special operations forces or intelligence units could severely jeopardize U.S. national security if a group were to strike the U.S. homeland or a U.S. embassy. The risks of not being engaged could be serious. Still, the possibility that direct U.S. engagement could inflame the local population suggests that U.S. policymakers should carefully weigh the type of engagement.

Conclusions

Congress has played – and should continue to play – a critical role in helping to support the conduct of counterterrorism efforts by special operations forces to protect U.S. national security. Tools like Section 1208 and 1206 authorities have been helpful to maintain pressure on al Qa'ida and other Salafi-jihadist groups. In addition, special operations forces will need to employ versatile platforms, including manned and unmanned fixed wing assets with intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. Examples range from the man-portable RQ-20A Puma to the medium altitude MQ-9 Reaper.

Over the foreseeable future, the United States should prioritize its U.S. counterterrorism resources – such as military, intelligence, diplomatic, financial, and law enforcement assistance – more systematically than it has done in the past. The United States will likely continue to need special operations forces for direct action, unconventional warfare, and partner capacity missions in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, and possibly Syria, where there are significant threats to the U.S. homeland. Over the long run, the United States needs to devote sufficient special operations resources – from signals collection capabilities to human intelligence collectors – to understand and counter Salafi-jihadist threats in these areas.

In addition, the United States needs to utilize special operations forces to help build partner capacity and conduct foreign internal defense with a limited set of countries in Africa (such as Nigeria, Algeria, Somalia, and Egypt) and the Middle East (such as Lebanon and Iraq). In these countries, terrorist groups may not be plotting attacks against the U.S. homeland, but they may be involved in attacks against U.S. structures (such as embassies), citizens, and other interests overseas. In addition, several regional countries – such as Jordan, Turkey, and Israel – are important allies in countering these terrorist groups.

Finally, there are several countries – such as Tunisia, Morocco, and Mali – where the United States should encourage allies (including NATO countries) to work with local governments, though there may be a limited role for special operations forces and other U.S. government agencies. In these countries, there is a low threat to the United States or sufficient local government capacity or an ally (like a NATO country)

willing to counter Salafi-jihadist groups. In Mali, for example, French and Malian forces retook most territory controlled by Salafi-jihadist groups in 2013 during Operation Serval. These steps should not be static, and the United States would need to reassess its options when there are changes in the threat environment or the counterterrorism capacity and willingness of local governments.

Over the long run, the persistent nature of the terrorism threat to the United States suggests that special operations forces should remain a key part of the struggle against al Qa'ida and other Salafi-jihadist groups. Thank you Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Sherman, and members of the Subcommittee. I look forward to your questions.