

# TESTIMONY

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## The Evolving Nature of Terrorism Nine Years after the 9/11 Attacks

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My testimony will consider four broad questions: A. What kind of the threat does al-Qaeda and its allies now pose to the United States? B. Who are the American recruits to these groups over the past couple of years? C. What kinds of targets are these groups likely to attack in the future, and what kinds of new tactics might they use? D. What factors are helping or hindering these groups?

**A. What is the threat? 1. Al-Qaeda and allied groups and those inspired by its ideas continue to pose a real but not catastrophic threat to the United States.** Such groups might successfully carry out bombings against symbolic targets that would kill dozens, such as against subways in Manhattan, as was the plan in September 2009 of Najibullah Zazi, an Afghan-American al-Qaeda recruit, or they might blow up an American passenger jet, as was the intention three months later of the Nigerian Umar Farouq Abdulmutallab, who had been recruited by “Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.” Had that bombing attempt succeeded, it would have killed hundreds. This level of threat is likely to persist for years to come, however, al-Qaeda no longer poses a national security threat to the American homeland of the type that could launch a mass-casualty attack sufficiently deadly in scope to reorient completely the country’s foreign policy, as the 9/11 attacks did.

**2. Al-Qaeda and likeminded groups have had minimal success in manufacturing, buying, stealing or being given viable chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear (CBRN) weapons.** Despite al-Qaeda’s long interest in acquiring chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) weapons, on the infrequent occasions that such groups have tried to deploy crude versions of these weapons their efforts have fizzled, as was evident in the largely ineffectual campaign of chlorine bomb attacks by “Al-Qaeda in Iraq” in 2007. Militant jihadist groups will only be able to deploy crude CBRN weapons for the foreseeable future and these will not be true “weapons of mass destruction,” but rather weapons of mass disruption, whose principal effect will be panic but few deaths. Indeed, a survey of the 172 individuals indicted or convicted in Islamist terrorism cases in the United States since 9/11 by the Maxwell School at Syracuse University and the New America Foundation found that none of the cases involved the use of CBRN. (In the one case where a radiological plot was initially alleged--that of the Hispanic-American al-Qaeda recruit, Jose Padilla---that allegation was dropped when the case went to trial).<sup>1</sup>

**B. Who are the recent American recruits? 1. A key shift in the threat to the homeland since around the time that Obama took office is the increasing Americanization of the leadership of al-Qaeda and aligned groups, and the larger numbers of Americans attaching themselves to these groups.** Anwar al-Awlaki, a Yemeni-American cleric who grew up in New Mexico, is today playing an important operational role in Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula,<sup>2</sup> while Adnan Shukrijumah, a Saudi-American who grew up in Brooklyn and Florida, is now al-Qaeda’s director of external operations. In 2009 Shukrijumah tasked Zazi and two other American residents to attack targets in the United States. Omar Hammami, a Baptist convert to Islam from Alabama, is both a key propagandist and a military commander for Al Shabab, the Somali al-Qaeda affiliate, while Chicagoan David Headley played a central role in

scoping the targets for the Lashkar-e-Taiba attacks on Mumbai in late 2008 that killed more than 160. There is little precedent for the high-level operational roles that Americans are currently playing in al-Qaeda and affiliated groups, other than the case of Ali Mohamed, an Egyptian-American former U.S. army sergeant, who was a key military trainer for al-Qaeda during the 1990s, until his arrest after the bombings of the two American embassies in Africa in 1998.

Al-Qaeda and likeminded groups have also successfully attracted into their ranks dozens of American citizens and residents as foot soldiers since January 2009. Most prominent among them are Zazi and the Pakistani-American Faizal Shahzad who was trained by the Taliban in Waziristan and then unsuccessfully attempted to detonate a car bomb in Times Square on May 1, 2010. According to a count by Andrew Lebovich of the New America Foundation, in 2009 43 American citizens or residents aligned with Sunni militant groups or their ideology were charged with terrorism crimes in the U.S. or elsewhere, the highest number in any year since 9/11. So far in 2010 20 have been similarly charged or convicted.

**2. It used to be that the United States was largely the target of Sunni militant terrorists, but now the country is also increasingly exporting American Sunni militants to do jihad overseas.** Not only was David Headley responsible for much of the surveillance of the targets for the 2008 Mumbai attacks, he also traveled to the Danish capital Copenhagen in 2009 where he reconnoitered the Jyllands-Posten newspaper for an attack. A year earlier Osama bin Laden had denounced the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in the Jyllands-Posten as a “catastrophe,” for which retribution would soon be meted out. Following his trip to Denmark, Headley travelled to Pakistan to meet with Ilyas Kashmiri who runs Harakat-ul-Jihad Islami, a terrorist organization tied to al-Qaeda. Headley was arrested in Chicago in October 2009 as he was preparing to travel to Pakistan again. He told investigators that he was planning to kill the Jyllands-Posten’s editor who had commissioned the cartoons, as well as the cartoonist Kurt Westergaard, who had drawn the cartoon he found most offensive; the Prophet Mohammed with a bomb concealed in his turban. Similarly, Coleen R. Larose, a Caucasian-American 46-year-old high school dropout known in jihadist circles by her Internet handle “JihadJane,” traveled to Europe in the summer of 2009 to scope out an alleged attack on Lars Vilks, a Swedish artist who had drawn a cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed’s head on the body of a dog.

By the end of 2009 fourteen American citizens and residents (all but one of Somali descent) had been indicted for recruiting at least twenty others to fight in Somalia, or for fundraising for Al Shabab. In addition to Zazi and Shahzad, five Muslim-Americans from northern Virginia volunteered for jihad in the Afghanistan/Pakistan theatre in 2009. They are now in custody in Pakistan charged with planning terrorist attacks. Similarly, a group of seven American citizens and residents of the town of Willow Creek, North Carolina led by Daniel Boyd, a convert to Islam who had fought in the jihad in Afghanistan against the Soviets, conceived of themselves as potential participants in overseas holy wars from Israel to Pakistan, and some traveled abroad to scope out opportunities to do jihad, according to federal prosecutors. Boyd also purchased eight rifles and a revolver

and members of his group did paramilitary training on two occasions in the summer of 2009.

**3. Another development in the past couple of years is the increasing diversification of the types of US-based jihadist militants, and the groups with which they have affiliated.** Militants engaged in jihadist terrorism in the past two years have ranged from pure “lone wolves” like Major Nidal Hasan who killed thirteen at Fort Hood, Texas in 2009 and Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad (aka Carlos Bledsoe) who killed a soldier the same year at a Little Rock recruiting station, to homegrown militants opting to fight in an overseas jihad with an al-Qaeda affiliate such as the twenty or so American recruits to Al Shabab, to militants like David Headley, who have played an instrumental role in planning for Lashkar-e-Taiba, to those with no previous militant affiliations such as the group of five friends from northern Virginia who travelled to Pakistan in 2009 in a quixotic quest to join the Taliban, and finally those American citizens such as Najibullah Zazi and Bryant Neal Vinas, who managed to plug directly into al-Qaeda Central in Pakistan’s tribal regions, or train with the Pakistani Taliban, as Faizal Shahzad did.

**4 These jihadists do not fit any particular ethnic profile.** According to a count by the New America Foundation and the Maxwell School at Syracuse University, of the 57 Americans indicted or convicted of Islamist terrorism crimes since January 2009, 21% (12) are Caucasian-Americans, 18% (10) are Arab-Americans, 14% (8) are South Asian-Americans, 9% (5) are African Americans, 4% (2) are Hispanic-Americans and 2% (1) are Caribbean-American. The single largest bloc are Somali-Americans at 31%, (19) a number that reflects the recent crackdown by the feds on support networks for Americans travelling to Somalia to fight with the al-Qaeda affiliate Al Shabab.<sup>3</sup>

### **C. What kinds of future targets or tactics might jihadist groups attack or use?**

**1.Attacking commercial aviation—the central nervous system of the global economy--continues to preoccupy al-Qaeda.** A cell of British Pakistanis, for instance, trained by al-Qaeda plotted to bring down seven passenger jets flying to the United States and Canada from Britain during the summer of 2006. During the trial of the men accused in the “planes plot” the prosecution argued that some 1,500 passengers would have died if all seven of the targeted planes had been brought down and most of the victims of the attacks would have been Americans, Britons and Canadians.<sup>4</sup> The UK-based planes plot did not stand alone: four years earlier an al-Qaeda affiliate in Kenya had almost succeeded in bringing down an Israeli passenger jet with a surface-to-air missile,<sup>5</sup> while in 2003 a plane belonging to the DHL courier service was struck by a missile as it took off from Baghdad airport.<sup>6</sup> The same year militants cased Riyadh airport and were planning to attack British Airways flights flying into Saudi Arabia.<sup>7</sup> In 2007 two British doctors with possible ties to Al-Qaeda in Iraq tried unsuccessfully to ignite a car bomb at Glasgow Airport. And if the Nigerian Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab had brought down the Northwest Airlines flight over Detroit on Christmas Day of 2009, it would have been al-Qaeda’s most successful attack on an American target since it had destroyed the World Trade Center towers and a wing of the Pentagon. According to several counterterrorism officials, the skilled Yemeni-based bomb-maker who built Abdulmutallab’s bomb is likely still at large. He is likely to try to bring down another commercial jet with a

concealed bomb that is not detectable by metal detectors. And al-Qaeda or an affiliate could also bring down a jet with a surface-to-air missile as was attempted in Kenya in 2002.

**2. Smaller-scale attacks.** As one counterterrorism official put it, “Abdulmutallab is not a very high barrier for terrorist groups to surmount. His attack demonstrated to other terrorists that you don’t have to be [9/11 operational commander] Khalid Sheikh Muhammad to carry out an attack” Another counterterrorism official said terrorist groups now see the US as more “gettable” because of the failed plots on Christmas Day 2009 and Times Square in 2010.

**3. Armed with the belief that they can bleed Western economies, Al-Qaeda and affiliated terrorist groups also target companies with distinctive Western brand names, in particular American hotel chains.** Since the 9/11 attacks, al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups have increasingly attacked economic and business targets. The shift in tactics is in part a response to the fact that the traditional pre-9/11 targets, such as American embassies, war ships, and military bases, are now better defended, while so-called “soft” economic targets are both ubiquitous and easier to hit. In 2002 a group of a dozen French defense contractors were killed as they left a Sheraton hotel in Karachi, which was heavily damaged. In 2003, suicide attackers bombed the J.W. Marriott hotel in Jakarta and attacked it again six years later, simultaneously also attacking the Ritz Carlton hotel in the Indonesian capital. In October 2004, in Taba, Egyptian jihadists attacked a Hilton hotel. In Amman, Jordan in November 2005, al-Qaeda attacked three hotels with well-known American names-- the Grand Hyatt, Radisson, and Days Inn.<sup>8</sup> And five-star hotels that cater to Westerners in the Muslim world are a perennial target for jihadists: in 2008 the Taj and Oberoi in Mumbai; the Serena in Kabul and the Marriott in Islamabad, and in 2009 the Pearl Continental in Peshawar. Such attacks will continue as hotels are in the hospitality business and can not turn themselves into fortresses.

**4. Attacking Israeli/Jewish targets.** This is an al-Qaeda strategy that has only emerged strongly post- 9/11. Despite bin Laden's declaration in February 1998 that he was creating the "World Islamic Front against the Crusaders and the Jews," al-Qaeda only started attacking Israeli or Jewish targets in early 2002. Since then, al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups have directed an intense campaign against Israeli and Jewish targets, killing journalist Daniel Pearl in Karachi, bombing synagogues and Jewish centers in Tunisia, Morocco and Turkey, and attacking an Israeli-owned hotel in Mombasa, Kenya, which killed thirteen. Al-Qaeda's North African affiliates attacked the Israeli embassy in Mauritania in 2008.

**5. The fact that American citizens have engaged in suicide operations in Somalia raises the possibility that suicide operations could start taking place in the United States itself.** To discount this possibility would be to ignore the lessons of the British experience. On April 30, 2003, two Britons of Pakistani descent launched a suicide attack in Tel Aviv, while the first British suicide bomber, Birmingham-born Mohammed Bilal, blew himself up outside an army barracks in Indian-held Kashmir in December 2000.<sup>9</sup> Despite those suicide attacks the British security services had concluded after 9/11 that

suicide bombings would not be much of a concern in the United Kingdom itself.<sup>10</sup> Then came the four suicide attackers in London on July 7, 2005, which ended that complacent attitude. Major Nidal Malik Hasan, a Palestinian-American medical officer and a rigidly observant Muslim who made no secret to his fellow officers of his opposition to America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, went on a shooting spree at the giant army base at Fort Hood, Texas, on November 5, 2009, killing thirteen and wounding many more. This attack seems to have been an attempted suicide operation in which Hasan planned a jihadist "death-by-cop." In the year before his killing spree, Major Hasan had made Web postings about suicide operations and the theological justification for the deaths of innocents and had sent more than a dozen emails to Anwar al Awlaki an American-born cleric living in Yemen who is a well-known al-Qaeda apologist.<sup>11</sup> Awlaki said he first received an email from Major Hasan on Dec. 17, 2008, and in that initial communication he "was asking for an edict regarding the [possibility] of a Muslim soldier [killing] colleagues who serve with him in the American army."<sup>12</sup>

**6. For Americans fired up by jihadist ideology, American soldiers fighting wars in two Muslim countries are particularly inviting targets.** A few months before Hasan's murderous spree, Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad, an African-American convert to Islam, had shot up a U.S. military recruiting station in Little Rock, Arkansas, killing a soldier and wounding another. Despite the fact that the FBI had had him under surveillance following a mysterious trip that he had recently taken to Yemen, Muhammad was still able to acquire guns and attack the recruiting station in broad daylight. When Muhammad was arrested in his vehicle, police found a rifle with a laser sight, a revolver, ammunition, and the makings of Molotov cocktails.<sup>13</sup> (The middle name that Muhammad had assumed after his conversion to Islam, Mujahid, or "holy warrior," should have been a red flag, as this is far from a common name among Muslims.) Daniel Boyd, the alleged leader of the jihadist cell in North Carolina, obtained maps of Quantico Marine Base in Virginia, which he cased for a possible attack on June 12, 2009. He also allegedly possessed armor-piercing ammunition, saying it was "to attack Americans," and said that one of his weapons would be used "for the base," an apparent reference to the Quantico facility.<sup>14</sup>

**7. Assassinations of key political leaders, US officials and those who are perceived as insulting Islam.** Because we rightly think of al-Qaeda and allied group as preoccupied by inflicting mass casualty attacks we tend to ignore their long history of assassinating or attempting to assassinate key leaders and American officials. Two days before 9/11 al-Qaeda assassinated the storied Afghan military commander Ahmad Shah Massoud; two years later they tried to kill Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf on two occasions; in 2009 the top Saudi counterterrorism official Mohamed bin Nayef narrowly escaped being killed by an al-Qaeda assassin bearing a concealed bomb; Hamid Karzai has been the subject of multiple Taliban assai nation attempts, the leading Pakistani politician Benazir Button succumbed to a Taliban suicide bomber in 2007; in 2002 American diplomat Leonard Foley was murdered in Amman, Jordan by Al-Qaeda in Iraq, and six years later the Taliban killed American aid worker Stephen Vance in Peshawar who was working on a project funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development. It is worth noting here that since 9/11 the US consulate in Karachi has been the subject of three serious

attacks; the U.S. consulate in Jeddah the subject of one large-scale attack and the U.S. embassy in Sana, Yemen the subject of two such attacks. As we have seen, Scandinavian cartoonist and artists who have drawn cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed are now frequently targeted by jihadists. For al-Qaeda and allied groups the Danish cartoon controversy has assumed some of the same importance that Salman Rushdie's fictional writings about the Prophet did for Khomeini's Iran two decades earlier.

**8. "Fedayeen" attacks.** The "success" of Lashkar-e-Taiba's 60-hour assault on Mumbai in late November 2008 that involved ten gunmen all willing to die in the assault is already producing other similar copycat operations. The long drawn out attacks in Mumbai produced round the clock coverage around the globe, something other terrorist groups want to emulate. Known as "Fedayeen" (self-sacrificer) attacks we have already seen in Afghanistan similar Fedayeen attacks on Afghan government buildings and in Pakistan a similar attack in October 2009 against GHQ, the Pakistani military headquarters.

**9. A frequent question after the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon was why didn't al-Qaeda mount an attack on a mall in some Midwestern town, thus showing the American public its ability to attack in Anywheresville, USA?** For the Muslims around the globe whom al-Qaeda is trying to influence an attack on an obscure, unknown town in the Midwest would have little impact, which explains al-Qaeda's continuing fixation on attacks on cities and targets well-known in the Islamic world. That explains Zazi's travel to Manhattan from Colorado and al-Qaeda's many attempts to bring down American passenger jets in the past decade. That is not, of course, to say that someone influenced by bin Laden's ideas-- but not part of al-Qaeda or one of its affiliates-- might not attempt an attack in the future in some obscure American town, but the terrorist organization and its affiliates remains fixated on symbolic targets.

**D. There are four factors helping jihadist militant groups. 1. Al-Qaeda's ideological influence on other jihadist groups is on the rise in South Asia.** One of the key leaders of the Taliban as it surged in strength several years after 9/11 was Mullah Dadullah, a thuggish but effective commander who like his counterpart in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, thrived on killing Shia, beheading his hostages, and media celebrity.<sup>15</sup> In interviews in 2006, Dadullah conceded what was obvious as the violence dramatically expanded in Afghanistan between 2005 and 2006: that the Taliban had increasingly morphed together tactically and ideologically with al-Qaeda. "Osama bin Laden, thank God, is alive and in good health. We are in contact with his top aides and sharing plans and operations with each other."<sup>16</sup> The Taliban also adopted the playbook of Al-Qaeda in Iraq wholesale from 2005 forward, embracing suicide bombers and IED attacks on U.S. and NATO convoys. The Taliban only began deploying suicide attackers in large numbers after the success of such operations in Iraq had become obvious to all. Where once the Taliban had banned television, now they boast an active video propaganda operation named Umar, which posts regular updates to the Web mimicking al-Qaeda's production arm, Al Sahab.

In 2008 for the first time the Taliban began planning seriously to attack targets in the West. According to Spanish prosecutors, the late leader of the Pakistani Taliban, Baitullah Mehsud sent a team of would-be suicide bombers to Barcelona in January 2008. Pakistani Taliban spokesman Maulvi Omar confirmed this in a later videotaped interview in which he said that those suicide bombers “were under pledge to Baitullah Mehsud” and were sent because of the Spanish military presence in Afghanistan. In March 2009 Baitullah Mehsud threatened an attack in America telling the Associated Press by phone, “Soon we will launch an attack in Washington that will amaze everyone in the world.” At the time this was largely discounted as bloviating, but by the end of the year the Pakistan Taliban was training an American recruit for just such an attack. Faisal Shahzad, who had once worked as a financial analyst in the accounting department at the Elizabeth Arden cosmetics company in Stamford, Connecticut, travelled to Pakistan in the winter of 2009 where he received five days of bomb-making training from the Taliban in the tribal region of Waziristan. Shahzad, also met with the Pakistani Taliban leader Hakimullah Mehsud, and a video of the meeting shows the two shaking hands and hugging.

Armed with his training by the Taliban Shahzad returned to Connecticut where he purchased a Nissan Pathfinder. He then built a bomb, which he placed in the SUV and detonated in Times Square on May 1, 2010 around 6 p.m. when the sidewalks were thick with tourists and theatergoers. The bomb, which was designed to act as a fuel-air explosive, luckily was a dud and Shahzad was arrested two days later as he tried to leave JFK Airport for Pakistan.<sup>17</sup> Media accounts largely painted Shahzad as a feckless terrorist. In fact Shahzad did a number of things indicating that he had received some at least rudimentary counter-surveillance techniques; he eliminated one of the Vehicle Identification Numbers on his SUV, he purchased the type of fertilizer which would not trigger suspicions that he was building a bomb, and he avoided building a hydrogen peroxide-based bomb of the kind that al-Qaeda recruit Najibullah Zazi was attempting the previous year as large scale purchases of hydrogen peroxide that don’t appear to have legitimate purposes are now likely to draw law enforcement attention.

The extent of the cooperation between the Pakistani Taliban and al-Qaeda could be seen in the suicide bombing that killed seven CIA officers and contractors in the American base at Khost in eastern Afghanistan on December 30, 2009. The suicide bomber, Humam Khalil Abu-Mulal al-Balawi, a Jordanian doctor, was a double agent: information he had earlier provided to the CIA was used to target militants in Pakistan.<sup>18</sup> Two months after Balawi’s suicide attack al-Qaeda’s video production arm released a lengthy interview with him videotaped some time before he died in which he laid out how he planned to attack the group of Agency officials using a bomb made from C-4.<sup>19</sup> Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, the number three in al-Qaeda, praised the suicide attack targeting the CIA officers saying, it was “to avenge our good martyrs” and listing several militant leaders felled by U.S. drone strikes,<sup>20</sup> while the chief of the Pakistani Taliban, Hakimullah Mehsud, appeared alongside Balawi in a prerecorded video saying the attack was revenge for the drone strike that had killed Hakimullah’s predecessor, Baitullah Mehsud, six months earlier.<sup>21</sup>

The Mumbai attacks of 2008 also showed that al-Qaeda's ideas about attacking Western and Jewish targets had also spread to other Pakistani militant groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), which had previously focused only on Indian targets. Over a three-day period in late November 2008 LeT carried out multiple attacks in Mumbai targeting five-star hotels housing Westerners and a Jewish-American community center. One of the more predictable foreign policy challenges of the next years is a "Mumbai II": a large-scale attack on a major Indian city by a Pakistani militant group that kills hundreds. The Indian government showed considerable restraint in its reaction to the provocation of the Mumbai attacks in 2008. Another such attack, however, would likely produce considerable political pressure on the Indian government to "do something." That something would likely involve incursions over the border to eliminate the training camps of Pakistani militant groups with histories of attacking India. That could lead in turn to a full-blown war for the fourth time since 1947 between India and Pakistan. Such a war involves the possibility of a nuclear exchange and the certainty that Pakistan would move substantial resources to its eastern border and away from fighting the Taliban on its western border, so relieving pressure on all the militant groups based there, including al-Qaeda.

In June CIA director Leon Panetta told ABC News that al-Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan is now "relatively small...I think at most, we're looking at maybe 50 to 100." The following month Mike Leiter, the head of the National Counterterrorism Center, told an audience in Aspen that there were probably 300 al-Qaeda leaders and fighters in Pakistan. For some, these small numbers suggested that the war against al-Qaeda was already won (lets maybe cite one or two examples here). But this was to overlook three key points: First, al-Qaeda has always been a small elite organization. There were only two hundred sworn members of al-Qaeda at the time of the 9/11 attacks and al-Qaeda's role has always been as an ideological and military vanguard seeking to influence and train other jihadist groups. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, for instance, in the past several years small numbers of al-Qaeda instructors embedded with larger Taliban units have functioned something like U.S. Special Forces do--as trainers and force multipliers.<sup>22</sup> The second point is that, as we have seen in the preceding paragraphs, al-Qaeda's ideology and tactics have spread to a wide range of large militant groups in South Asia all of which are relatively large—the Taliban in Afghanistan alone is estimated to number 25,000 men, while Lashkar-e-Taiba has thousands of fighting men in its ranks. Finally, al-Qaeda Central has seeded a number of franchises around the Middle East and North Africa that now are acting in an al-Qaeda-like manner with little or no contact with al-Qaeda Central itself; a phenomenon we will examine next.

## **2. Al-Qaeda Central's influence has extended to jihadist groups beyond South Asia.**

In September 2009, the Somali Islamist insurgent group Al Shabab formally pledged allegiance to bin Laden<sup>23</sup> following a two-year period in which it had recruited Somali-Americans and other U.S. Muslims to fight in the war in Somalia. Six months earlier bin Laden had given his own imprimatur to the Somali jihad in an audiotape released titled "Fight On, Champions of Somalia."<sup>24</sup> After it announced its fealty to bin Laden, Shabab was able to recruit larger numbers of foreign fighters, by one estimate up to 1,200 were

working with the group by 2010.<sup>25</sup> Today, Shabab controls about half of Somalia's territory.

Al Shabab managed to plant al-Qaeda-like ideas into the heads of even its American recruits. Shirwa Ahmed, an ethnic Somali, graduated from high school in Minneapolis in 2003, and then worked pushing passengers in wheelchairs at Minneapolis Airport. During this period Ahmed was radicalized; the exact mechanisms of that radicalization are still murky but in late 2007 Ahmed he traveled to Somalia. A year later, on October 29, 2008, Ahmed drove a truck loaded with explosives towards a government compound in Puntland, northern Somalia, blowing himself up and killing about twenty people. The FBI matched Ahmed's finger, recovered at the scene of the bombing, to fingerprints already on file for him.<sup>26</sup> Ahmed was the first American suicide attacker anywhere. It's possible that eighteen-year-old Omar Mohamud of Seattle was the second. On September 17, 2009, two stolen United Nations vehicles loaded with bombs blew up at Mogadishu airport, killing more than a dozen peacekeepers of the African Union. The FBI suspected that Mohamud was one of the bombers.<sup>27</sup>

The chances of getting killed in Somalia were quite high for the couple of dozen or so Americans who volunteered to fight there; in addition to the two men who conducted suicide operations, six other Somali-Americans between eighteen and thirty-years-old were killed in Somalia between 2007 and 2009 as well as Ruben Shumpert, an African-American convert to Islam from Seattle.<sup>28</sup> Given the high death rate of the Americans fighting in Somalia, as well as the considerable attention this group received from the FBI, it was unlikely that American veterans of the Somali war posed much of a threat to the United States itself. It was, however, plausible now that Al Shabab had declared itself to be an al-Qaeda affiliate, that U.S. citizens in the group might be recruited to engage in anti-American operations overseas. Al Shabab has shown that it is capable of carrying out operations outside of Somalia, bombing two groups of fans watching the World Cup in Uganda on July 11, 2010, attacks which killed more than seventy. Eight months earlier a 28-year-old Somali man had forced himself into the home of Kurt Westergaard--the Danish cartoonist David Headley was planning to kill--and armed with a knife and an ax tried, unsuccessfully, to break into the panic room where the Danish cartoonist was hiding. Danish intelligence officials say the suspect has links with al-Shabab and al-Qaeda leaders in eastern Africa.

In September 2006 the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat's leader Abu Musab Abdul Wadud, explained that al-Qaeda "is the only organization qualified to gather together the mujahideen." Subsequently taking the name "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb" (AQIM) the group, which had traditionally focused only on Algerian targets, conducted a range of operations; bombing the United Nations building in Algiers; attacking the Israeli embassy in Mauritania, and murdering French and British hostages.<sup>29</sup> AQIM has hitherto not been able to carry out attacks in the West and is one of the weakest of al-Qaeda's affiliates, only having the capacity for infrequent attacks in North Africa.

In 2008 there was a sense that Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was on the verge of defeat. The American ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker said, "You are not going to hear me say that al-Qaeda is defeated, but they've never been closer to defeat than they are now." Certainly al-AQI has lost the ability to control large swaths of the country and a good chunk of the Sunni population as it did in 2006, but the group has proven surprisingly resilient as demonstrated by the that it pulled off large-scale bombings in central Baghdad in 2009 and 2010. AQI can also play the nationalist card quite effectively in the north, especially over the disputed city of Kirkuk, which is claimed by both Iraq's Arabs and Kurd, and Iraqi officials believe that AQI is entering into new marriages of convenience with Sunni nationalist groups that only three years ago it was at war with. It is worth noting that in the first three months of 2010 the National Counterterrorism Center found that there were more terrorist attacks in Iraq—566—than any other country in the world; attacks that killed 667 people.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was the group responsible for Umar Farouq Abdulmutallab's botched attempt to explode a bomb on Northwest flight 253 over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009. Abdulmutallab boarded the flight in Amsterdam, which was bound for Detroit with some three hundred passengers and crew on board. Secreted in his underwear was a bomb made with eighty grams of PETN, a plastic explosive that was not detected at airport security in Amsterdam or the Nigerian capital, Lagos, from where he had originally flown. He also carried a syringe with a chemical initiator that would set off the bomb.<sup>30</sup> As the plane neared Detroit the young man tried to initiate his bomb with the chemical, setting himself on fire and suffering severe burns. Some combination of his own ineptitude, faulty bomb construction, and the quick actions of the passengers and crew who subdued him and extinguished the fire prevented an explosion that might have brought down the plane, which would have crashed near Detroit killing all on board and also likely killing additional Americans on the ground. Immediately after he was arrested Abdulmutallab told investigators that the explosive device "was acquired in Yemen along with instructions as to when it should be used."<sup>31</sup>

The Northwest Airlines plot had been presaged in virtually every detail a few months earlier several thousand miles to the east of Detroit. On August 28, 2009 the Saudi Arabian deputy minister of interior, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, survived a bombing attack launched by AQAP. Because he leads Saudi Arabia's counterterrorism efforts against al-Qaeda, the prince is a key target for the terrorist group. Prince Nayef was responsible for overseeing the kingdom's terrorist rehabilitation program, and some two dozen important members of al-Qaeda had previously surrendered to him in person. Abdullah Hassan al-Asiri, the would-be assassin, a Saudi who had fled to Yemen, posed as a militant willing to surrender personally to Prince Nayef.<sup>32</sup> During the month of Ramadan, traditionally a time of repentance in the Muslim world, Asiri gained an audience with the prince at his private residence in Jeddah, presenting himself as someone who could also persuade other militants to surrender. Pretending that he was reaching out to those militants, Asiri briefly called some members of al-Qaeda to tell them that he was standing by Prince Nayef. After he finished the call, the bomb blew up, killing Asiri but only slightly injuring the prince, who was a few feet away from his would-be assassin. A Saudi government official characterized the prince's narrow escape

as a "miracle."<sup>33</sup> According to the official Saudi investigation, Asiri concealed the bomb in his underwear, which was made of PETN, the same plastic explosive that would be used in the Detroit case, and he exploded the hundred-gram device using a detonator with a chemical fuse, as Abdulmutallab would attempt to do on the Northwest flight. Prince Nayef's assassin also had had to pass through metal detectors before he was able to secure an audience with the prince. Shortly after both the failed attacks on Prince Nayef and the Northwest passenger jet, AQAP took credit for the operations and released photographs of the two bombers taken while they were in Yemen.

If Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab had succeeded in bringing down Northwest Airlines flight 253, the bombing not only would have killed hundreds but would also have had a large effect on the U.S. economy already reeling from the effect of the worst recession since the Great Depression, and would have devastated the critical aviation and tourism businesses. And if the attack had succeeded it would also have likely dealt a crippling blow to Obama's presidency. According to the White House's own review of the Christmas Day plot, there was sufficient information known to the U.S. government to determine that Abdulmutallab was likely working for al-Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen and that the group was looking to expand its terrorist attacks beyond the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>34</sup> Yet the intelligence community "did not increase analytic resources working" on that threat, while information about the possible use of a PETN bomb by the Yemeni group was well-known within the national security establishment, including to John Brennan, Obama's top counterterrorism adviser who was personally briefed by Prince Nayef about the assassination attempt against him.<sup>35</sup> As Obama admitted in a meeting of his national security team a couple of weeks after the Christmas Day plot, "We dodged a bullet."<sup>36</sup>

**3. Preservation of al-Qaeda's top leaders.** The two key leaders of the organization, bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri, are still at liberty. Why does this matter? First, there is the matter of justice for the almost 3,000 people who died in the September 11 attacks and for the thousands of other victims of al-Qaeda's attacks around the world. Second, every day that bin Laden remains at liberty is a propaganda victory for al-Qaeda. Third, although bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri aren't managing al-Qaeda's operations on a daily basis, they guide the overall direction of the jihadist movement around the world, even while they are in hiding through videotapes and audiotapes that they continue to release on a regular basis. Those messages from al-Qaeda's leaders have reached untold millions worldwide via television, the Internet and newspapers. The tapes have not only instructed al-Qaeda's followers to continue to kill Westerners and Jews, but some also carried specific instructions that militant cells then acted on. In March 2008, for instance, bin Laden denounced the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in the Danish newspaper, which he said would soon be avenged. Three months later, an al-Qaeda suicide attacker bombed the Danish Embassy in Islamabad, killing six.

**4. Our overreactions can play into the hands of the jihadist groups.** When al-Qaeda and affiliated groups can provoke a massive amount of overwrought media coverage based on attacks that don't even succeed--such as the near-miss on Christmas Day 2009--we are doing their work for them. The person who seems to best understand the benefits of American overreaction is bin Laden himself, who in 2004 said on a tape that aired on

al Jazeera: “All that we have to do is to send two mujahedeen to the furthest point east to raise a piece of cloth on which is written al-Qaeda, in order to make generals race there to cause America to suffer human, economic and political losses without their achieving anything of note other than some benefits for their private corporations. American officials and the wider public should realize that by the law of averages al-Qaeda or an affiliate will succeed in getting some kind of attack through in the next years, and the best response to that would be to demonstrate that we as a society are resilient and are not be intimidated by such actions.

**There are five negative factors for al-Qaeda and allied groups: 1. Drone attacks.** In 2007, there were three drone strikes in Pakistan; in 2008, there were 34; and, by the date of this hearing on September 15, 2010, the Obama administration has already authorized 114. Since the summer of 2008 U.S. drones have killed scores of lower-ranking militants and at least a dozen mid-and upper-level leaders within al-Qaeda or the Taliban in Pakistan’s tribal regions. One of them was Abu Laith Al-Libi, who orchestrated a 2007 suicide attack targeting Vice President Dick Cheney while he was visiting Bagram air base in Afghanistan. Libi was then described as the number-three man in the al-Qaeda hierarchy, perhaps the most dangerous job in the world, given that the half-dozen or so men who have occupied that position since 9/11 have ended up dead or in prison. Other leading militants killed in the drone strikes include Abu Haris, al-Qaeda's chief in Pakistan; Khalid Habib, Abu Zubair Al-Masri, and Abdullah Azzam Al-Saudi, all of whom were senior members of Al-Qaeda; Abu Jihad Al-Masri, al-Qaeda's propaganda chief; and Tahir Yuldashev, the leader of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, an insurgent group with long ties to al-Qaeda, and Baitullah Mehsud, the commander of the Pakistani Taliban. None of the strikes, however, have targeted bin Laden.

Officials in both the Bush and Obama administrations have been leery of discussing the highly classified drone program on the record, but a window into their thinking was provided by the remarks of then-CIA director Michael Hayden on November 13, 2008, as the drone program was in full swing. "By making a safe haven feel less safe, we keep al-Qaeda guessing. We make them doubt their allies; question their methods, their plans, even their priorities." This strategy seems to have worked, at least up to a point. Since the summer of 2008 when the drone program was ramped up, law enforcement authorities have uncovered only two plots against American targets traceable back to Pakistan's tribal regions (the Zazi and Shahzad cases mentioned above). However, Western militants have continued to travel to the tribal regions where, by one estimate, as many as 150 Westerners have sought training in recent years, including 30 or so German citizens or residents. The drone program has certainly put additional pressure on al-Qaeda’s propaganda arm and its top leaders. Al-Qaeda takes its propaganda operations seriously; bin Laden has observed that 90 percent of his battle is waged in the media, and Zawahiri has made similar comments. In 2007, al-Qaeda’s video production arm As-Sahab had a banner year, releasing almost 100 tapes. But the year the drone program was expanded the number of releases dropped by half in 2008, indicating that the group's leaders were more concerned with survival than public relations. According to IntelCenter, a Washington-based group that tracks jihadist propaganda in 2010 Layman al Zawahiri released the fewest number of tapes in seven years—only two audiotapes as opposed to

nine audiotapes and one video in 2009--while other al-Qaeda leaders like bin Laden and Abu Yaha al-Libi similarly have fallen relatively silent this year. According to a counterterrorism official the fact that bin Laden and Zawahiri are saying so little is causing some criticism of the leaders of al-Qaeda within the organization itself. These critics say that it is worrisome that their leaders are saying so little and are not managing the organization. Some have gone so far as to say "it would be helpful if the boss gave a damn," according to this counterterrorism official.

When Faisal Shahzad travelled to Pakistan to link up with the Taliban in the winter of 2009 he spent a total of forty days in the Taliban heartland of Waziristan but he only spent five days actually being trained, which likely accounts for his lack of skills as a bomb-maker. This abbreviated training schedule may have been the result of the pressure that the drone program is putting on militants in Pakistan's tribal regions, including Waziristan. The well-known fact that the drones have killed hundreds of militants in Pakistan's border regions is also having an effect on where western militants-- including from the United States-- are seeking training, some increasingly opting to go to Somalia and Yemen, according to a counterterrorism official.

**2. Increasingly negative Pakistani attitudes and actions against the militants based on their territory.** If there is a silver lining to the militant atrocities that have plagued Pakistan in the past several years it is the fact that the Pakistani public, government and military are increasingly seeing the jihadist militants on their territory in a hostile light. The Taliban's assassination of Benazir Bhutto, the country's most popular politician; al-Qaeda's bombing of the Marriott hotel in Islamabad; the attack on the visiting Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore; the widely circulated video images of the Taliban flogging a 17-year-old girl-- each of these has provoked real revulsion among the Pakistani public, which is, in the main, utterly opposed to the militants. In fact, historians will likely record the Taliban's decision to move earlier this year from the Swat Valley into Buner District, only 60 miles from Islamabad, as the tipping point that finally galvanized the sclerotic Pakistani state to confront the fact that the jihadist monster it had helped to spawn was now trying to swallow its creator.

The subsequent military operation to evict the Taliban from Buner and Swat was not seen by the Pakistani public as the army acting on behalf of the United States as was often the case in previous such operations, but something that was in their own national interest. Support for Pakistani army operations against the Taliban in Swat increased from 28% two years ago to 69% today. Support for suicide bombing has dropped from 33% to 8% in Pakistan over the past several years and the number of Pakistanis who feel that the Taliban and al-Qaeda operating in Pakistan are a "serious problem" has risen from 57% to 86% since 2007. After having suffered three defeats in the tribal region of South Waziristan over the course of the previous five years, the Pakistani army went in there again in October 2009, this time with a force of at least thirty thousand troops, following several months of bombing of Taliban positions.<sup>37</sup> These operations were done with the support of at least half of the Pakistani public, which did not view them as being done solely for the benefit of the United States, as previous military operations against the Taliban had generally been seen.<sup>38</sup> The changing attitudes of the Pakistani public,

military and government constitutes arguably the most significant strategic shift against al-Qaeda and its allies in the past several years as it will have a direct impact on the terrorist organization and allied groups that are headquartered in Pakistan. However, changing attitudes in Pakistan do not mean, for the moment, that the Pakistani military will do much to move against the Taliban groups on their territory that are attacking US and other NATO forces in Afghanistan such as Mullah Omar's Quetta shura, the Haqqani network and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezbi-Islami.

**3. Increasingly hostile attitudes towards al-Qaeda and allied groups in the Muslim world in general.** Hostility to militant jihadist groups is growing sharply in much of the Muslim world today. This is because most of the victims of these groups are Muslim civilians. This has created a dawning recognition among Muslims that the ideological virus that unleashed September 11 and the terrorist attacks in London and Madrid is the same virus now wreaking havoc in the Muslim world in countries like Pakistan and Iraq. It is human nature to be concerned mostly with threats that directly affect one's own interests and so as jihadi terrorists started to target the governments and civilians of Muslim countries this led to a hardening of attitudes against them. Until the terrorist attacks of May 2003 in Riyadh, for instance, the Saudi government was largely in denial about its large scale al-Qaeda problem. There have been some twenty terrorist attacks since then in the Kingdom and as a result the Saudi government has taken aggressive steps-- arresting thousands of suspected terrorists, killing more than a hundred, implementing an expansive public information campaign against them, and arresting preachers deemed to be encouraging militancy. A similar process has happened in Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country in the world, where Jemaah Islamiyah, the al-Qaeda affiliate there, is more or less out of business; its leaders in jail or dead, and its popular legitimacy close to zero. Polling around the Muslim world shows also sharp drops in support for Osama bin Laden personally and for suicide bombings in general. Support for suicide bombings has dropped in Indonesia, for instance, from 26% to 15% in the past eight years and in Jordan from 43% to 20%.

**4. Jihadist ideologues and erstwhile militant allies have now also turned against al-Qaeda.** It's not just Muslim publics who have turned against al-Qaeda; it is also some of the religious scholars and militants whom the organization has relied upon in the past for various kinds of support. Around the sixth anniversary of September 11, Sheikh Salman Al Awdah, a leading Saudi religious scholar, addressed al-Qaeda's leader on MBC, a widely watched Middle East TV network: "My brother Osama, how much blood has been spilt? How many innocent people, children, elderly, and women have been killed ... in the name of Al-Qaeda? Will you be happy to meet God Almighty carrying the burden of these hundreds of thousands or millions [of victims] on your back?" What was noteworthy about Al Awdah's statement was that it was not simply a condemnation of terrorism, or even of September 11, but that it was a personal rebuke, which clerics in the Muslim world have shied away from. Al Awdah's rebuke was also significant because he is considered one of the fathers of the Sahwa, the fundamentalist awakening movement that swept through Saudi Arabia in the 1980s. Similarly, leaders of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, which was once loosely aligned with al-Qaeda, in 2009 officially turned

against the groups' ideology of global jihad and made a peace deal with the Libyan government.

**5. Al-Qaeda's four key strategic problems.** Encoded in the DNA of apocalyptic jihadist groups like al-Qaeda are the seeds of their own long-term destruction: Their victims are often Muslim civilians; they don't offer a positive vision of the future (but rather the prospect of Taliban-style regimes from Morocco to Indonesia); they keep expanding their list of enemies, including any Muslim who doesn't precisely share their world view; and they seem incapable of becoming politically successful movements because their ideology prevents them from making the real-world compromises that would allow them to engage in genuine politics. **a. Al-Qaeda keeps killing Muslims civilians.** This is a double whammy for al-Qaeda as the Koran forbids killing civilians and fellow Muslims. **b. Al-Qaeda has not created a genuine mass political movement.** While bin Laden enjoys some personal popularity in the Muslim world that does not translate into mass support for al-Qaeda in the manner that Hezbollah enjoys such support in Lebanon. That is not surprising -- there are no al-Qaeda social welfare services, schools, hospitals or clinics. **c. Al-Qaeda's leaders have constantly expanded their list of enemies.** Al-Qaeda has said at various times that it is opposed to all Middle Eastern regimes; Muslims who don't share their views; the Shia; most Western countries; Jews and Christians; the governments of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Russia; most news organizations; the United Nations; and international NGOs. It's very hard to think of a category of person, institution, or government that al-Qaeda does not oppose. Making a world of enemies is never a winning strategy. **d. Al-Qaeda has no positive vision.** We know what bin Laden is against, but what's he really for? If you asked him, he would say the restoration of the caliphate. In practice that means Taliban-style theocracies stretching from Indonesia to Morocco. A silent majority of Muslims don't want that. Al-Qaeda is, in short, losing the war of ideas in the Islamic world, although as Bruce Hoffman has pointed out, even terrorist groups with little popular support or legitimacy such as the Baader-Meinhof gang in 1970s Germany can continue to carry out frequent terror attacks.

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<sup>3</sup> Bergen Hoffman op. cit.

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