

The Evolving Terrorist Threat to the U.S. Homeland

Statement to the Subcommittee on Intelligence, Information Sharing and

Terrorism Risk Assessment

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify to the subcommittee regarding the nature and evolution of the terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland. The title of the hearing refers to a single terrorist group, al-Qa'ida, but it is important to place the threat from that group within a larger context that includes other radical Islamist cells and individuals—some that may have already gotten into terrorism, and some that may do so in the future—that also constitute portions of that threat. Many of those cells and individuals may be motivated by grievances and sentiments that al-Qa'ida has sought to exploit. Some may even be sympathetic to some of al-Qa'ida's aims. But this does not necessarily mean that their activity has been instigated, organized, or directed by al-Qa'ida.

There is a widespread tendency to gauge the seriousness with which one ought to view any instance of political violence or attempted violence according to whether or not it is “linked” to al-Qa'ida, or linked to something or someplace that is in turn linked to al-Qa'ida. The existence of such links is taken as an indicator that we ought to be concerned; their absence is taken as reason not to worry, or to worry less. This manner of interpreting incidents or plots is a misleading way of assessing terrorist threats to the U.S. homeland.

The whole notion of “links” needs to be used with far more care and caution than it customarily is. Links can—and do—mean anything from operational control to the most innocuous and casual contacts that tell us nothing about the impetus for terrorism. Even if a link is firmly established and goes beyond casual contact, it does not by itself tell us from which end of the link the initiative to establish it came.

It is appropriate that the committee should reexamine the terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland in light of several incidents or alleged plots that have been in the news in recent months. Such episodes do raise important issues about the nature of that threat. As a private citizen, I cannot add to the factual knowledge about any incident beyond what you already have read in the newspapers. In any event, caution is required in drawing conclusions about larger patterns from individual incidents. We tend to take one incident as a pattern and two as a trend, even if it is not.

Roots of Radicalization

With those caveats, one key question to consider is why and how individuals become radicalized to the extent that they commit or attempt, or even contemplate, terrorist violence. A terrorist group or leader may provide an ideology that rationalizes extreme acts and in some cases an organizational structure that facilitates carrying them out. A necessary ingredient, however, is individual pre-existing anger or discontent that is sufficiently strong for the blandishments of a terrorist group to have any appeal in the first place. That predisposition in turn may have any or all of several sources, ranging from frustrating personal circumstances to public policies that incur more widespread ire and controversy. To the extent that people in the United States, including U.S. citizens, are turning onto the malevolent path of terrorism against the United States itself, such sources provide the most important part of the explanation for why they do so. Even the most adept and aggressively proselytizing foreign terrorist group could not make gains without raw material in the form of disaffected and alienated individuals.

And even when a foreign terrorist group, be it al-Qa'ida or any other, does manage to get involved, the initiative is as likely as not to come from the individual. Najibullah Zasi—although there is much about his case that is not publicly known and more that we probably will find out in the future—appears to have become radicalized during his days selling coffee and pastries from a cart in lower Manhattan. This was before, not after, he reportedly spent time at a training camp in Pakistan. And of course, one needs a prior motive to do something like trekking to the other side of the globe to attend such a camp.

To the extent that a foreign group such as al-Qa'ida is having any influence on disaffected Americans, it is less through face-to-face direction or instruction and more through an extreme ideology. Al-Qa'ida and in particular the leadership of al-Qa'ida, in the persons of bin Ladin and Zawahiri, is today less relevant to the security of the U.S. homeland as a source of operational instigation, direction, and control than as a source of malevolent ideas.

Major Trends

The most important patterns in international terrorism, with particular reference to threats to the U.S. homeland, in the eight years since 9/11 can be summarized in two trends pointing in different directions. The first is that the group that accomplished 9/11, al-Qa'ida, is—although still a threat—less capable of pulling off something of that magnitude than it was in 2001. This is possible in large part because of a variety of measures that the outrage of the American public made politically possible in a way that was not possible before 9/11. These include enhanced defensive security measures at home as well as expanded offensive efforts overseas that have eroded al-Qa'ida's organizational infrastructure.

The other major pattern or trend is that the broader violent jihadist movement of which al-Qa'ida is a part is probably at least as large and strong as it was eight years ago. Here again, some of our own actions have been major contributors. The war in Iraq was one such action. It provided a jihadists' training ground and networking opportunity similar to what the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan had provided two decades earlier. And in the words of the U.S. intelligence community, the war in Iraq became a "*cause celebre*" for radical Islamists.

The overall result of these two trends is a terrorist threat that is more diffuse than it was several years ago. The centers of action and initiative for possible attacks, including against the U.S. homeland, are more numerous than they were several years ago.

Home-Grown Terrorism

Against this backdrop is the specter—raised anew by some of the recent incidents—of people in the United States, including U.S. citizens, in effect adopting some variant of radical Islamism and perpetrating terrorist attacks within the United States. The possibility is worthy of attention, if for no other reason because of the operational advantages and opportunities this represents for terrorists. Home-grown perpetrators have significant advantages over foreign operatives who, like the 9/11 terrorists, come into the country from abroad to commit their deed. The natives do not have to deal with enhanced border control procedures. They do not stand out. They are, in short, harder to detect. And they are more familiar with the territory and with their targets.

These operational advantages would make U.S. citizens or residents attractive recruiting targets for foreign terrorist groups hoping to conduct operations within the United States. But for the same operational reasons, any U.S. persons who do become terrorists would present a significant counterterrorist challenge even without having any affiliation with al-Qa'ida or some other foreign group.

A common and reassuring observation among those who have studied the problem of home-grown terrorism is that the United States is less vulnerable than most European countries to terrorism and other political violence committed by their own Muslim populations. The reason is that American Muslims are better integrated and less ghettoized than their counterparts in Europe. This is true, but ghettos are not a necessity, and community integration is not a foolproof safeguard, when it comes to individuals or small groups committing what still can be significant acts of violence.

Incidents to date cannot be described as yet adding up to a significant home-grown Islamist terrorist problem in the United States. But episodes like the shooting at Fort Hood suggest the possibility of more, and the sort of reasons and motivations that could make for more. And this does not depend on any recruiting successes or training activity by the likes of al-Qa'ida.

Methods of Attack

The security measures implemented since 9/11 increase the importance of lone individuals or very small groups that may emerge within the United States, relative to the importance of an established foreign terrorist organization such as al-Qa'ida. Those security measures have made it harder to conduct a terrorist spectacular like 9/11, where the resources, sophistication, and experience of such an organization would be most relevant. The hardening of the civil aviation system in the United States has made it much more difficult to conduct an attack *a lot* like 9/11. This leaves the many more mundane but less rectifiable vulnerabilities in American society. A disturbing and unavoidable fact is that just about anyone can stage a shoot-'em-up in any of countless public places in the United States. This is low-tech and unsophisticated, but it can cause enough carnage to make a significant impact on the American consciousness. The likely shape of future terrorist methods of attack in the United States is best represented by what happened at Fort Hood, or by the "D.C. sniper" episode that traumatized the national capital area a few years ago, an episode about which we were reminded when the principal perpetrator was executed just last week.

Effects of Military Operations Overseas

All of this has implications for the effect, if any, of our own counterterrorist and military operations overseas on the level of threat to the U.S. homeland. Some such operations, including the firing of missiles from unmanned aircraft at individual targets in northwest Pakistan and elsewhere, have contributed to the eroding of the organizational capabilities of foreign terrorist groups and specifically al-Qa'ida. To the extent those capabilities are relevant to possible attacks on the U.S. homeland—and for the reasons I mentioned, that relevance is limited—they may have some positive effect on homeland security. Kinetic operations do not diminish the ideological and inspirational role that now is probably the more important contribution that al-Qa'ida makes to threats to American security.

The larger use of U.S. military force now under discussion is, of course, the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. Pursuing and expanding that counterinsurgency would not reduce the threat of terrorist attack to the U.S. homeland. The people we are fighting—Afghans loosely grouped under the label “Taliban”—have no interest in the United States except insofar as we are in Afghanistan and frustrating their objectives there. Their sometime allies in al-Qa'ida do not require a piece of physical territory to conceive, plan, prepare, and conduct terrorist operations against western interests. To the extent the group finds a physical haven useful, even a successful counterinsurgency in line with General McChrystal's strategy would still leave such havens available to the group in Pakistan, in the unsecured portions of Afghanistan, or elsewhere.

Meanwhile the use of military force can exacerbate the terrorist threat by stoking anger against the United States and U.S. policies, largely because of the inevitable collateral damage. The anger increases the likelihood of people sympathizing with or supporting anti-U.S. terrorism, and in some cases joining or initiating such terrorism themselves. We already have seen such angry anti-Americanism in response to some of the missile strikes, and on a larger scale in response to military operations on the ground in Afghanistan, where previously dominant pro-American opinion has in large part dissipated. An expansion of the counterinsurgency would add resentment against the United States as a perceived occupying power to the anger over collateral damage.

We also have already seen such sentiments translate into anti-U.S. violence in Afghanistan in the form of many Afghans who have no liking for Taliban ideology or rule but have taken up arms to oppose American forces. Similar sentiments can have similar effects far from the field of battle, including in the U.S. homeland. Of all the elements of terrorism and counterterrorism that move easily across continents and oceans in a globalized world, emotion-stoking news about controversial policies and events is one of the easiest to move. However one chooses to characterize what Nidal Hasan did at Fort Hood, his reported sentiments about America's current overseas wars and how these sentiments figured into the action he took illustrate a phenomenon that we should not be surprised to see more of, albeit in different forms.

The indirect effects of anger and resentment are inherently more difficult to gauge or even to perceive than the direct effects of military action in seizing or securing territory or in killing individual operatives. But this does not mean they are less important in affecting terrorist threats. They are the main reason that in my judgment, expansion and extension of the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan is more likely to increase than to decrease the probability that Americans inside the United States will fall victim to terrorism in the years ahead.