TESTIMONY

Confronting al Qaeda: Understanding the threat in Afghanistan and beyond

Peter Bergen
New America Foundation Senior Research Fellow

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Senator Kerry, Senator Lugar and other members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My testimony will attempt to cover the following areas: al Qaeda's current threat to the United States; to American interests around the world, and to US allies; likely targets that al Qaeda will attack over the coming years and the kinds of tactics the group is likely to employ in the future; the impact of US counterterrorism measures on al Qaeda as well as other factors that have an impact on the group's viability; the current status of al Qaeda's closest allies; and will conclude with some broad observations about American policy in Afghanistan, and how that might impact al Qaeda in the future, as this is a matter of current interest to many policymakers.

A. Al Qaeda's threat to the American homeland.

Al Qaeda's ability to attack the United States directly is currently low. Why? First, the American Muslim community has rejected the al Qaeda ideological virus. American Muslims have instead overwhelmingly signed up for the "American Dream," enjoying higher incomes and educational levels than the average. Second, when jihadist terrorists have attacked the United States, they have arrived from outside the country. The 19 hijackers of 9/11, for instance, all came from elsewhere, while Ramzi Yousef, the mastermind of the 1993 Trade Center bombing, flew to New York from Pakistan. Today's no-fly list and other protective measures make entering the country much more difficult. Third, measures like the establishment of the National Counterterrorism Center, where officials from different branches of government share information and act on terrorist threats have made us safer. And so, a catastrophic mass-casualty assault in the United States along the lines of 9/11 is no longer plausible.

But the recent case of Najibullah Zazi, an Afghan-American resident of Denver Colorado, does raise some serious concerns about al Qaeda's continued ability to target the United States. Unlike many of the post-9/11 American terrorism cases, Zazi's case does not appear to have been informant-driven. Zazi appears to have been either the leader or a foot soldier in the first genuine al Qaeda sleeper cell discovered in the United States in the past several years.

Zazi travelled to Pakistan in late August 2008 where by his own admission he received training on explosives from al Qaeda in the Pakistani tribal regions along the Afghan border. On Zazi's laptop computer the FBI discovered he had stored pages of handwritten notes about the manufacture and initiation of explosives and the components of various detonators and fusing systems, technical know-how he had picked up at one of al Qaeda's training facilities in the tribal regions sometime between the late summer of 2008 and January 2009, when he returned to the United States.

In the Denver area over the summer of 2009 Zazi bought at least 18 bottles of hydrogen peroxide-based hair products and was allegedly planning to use the seemingly innocuous hair bleach to assemble deadly homemade bombs. Early last month, in a Denver motel

room that he had rented for that purpose, Zazi laboriously mixed up batches of the noxious chemicals before he was arrested.

The Zazi case is a reminder of al Qaeda's ability to attract recruits who are "clean skins" without previous criminal records or known terrorist associations and who are quite familiar with the West—Zazi's family first arrived in the United States when he was fourteen. And although much of the case still remains murky, Zazi appears to have had associates in the U.S. who traveled with him to Pakistan and may have been helping him to assemble large quantities of hydrogen peroxide. And if the government's allegations are correct and Zazi had managed to carry out his plans, he could have killed scores of Americans.

That said, today the al Qaeda organization no longer poses a direct national security threat to the United States itself, but rather poses a second-order threat in which the worst case scenario would be an al Qaeda-trained terrorist managing to pull off an attack on the scale of something in between the 1993 Trade Center attack, which killed six, and the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995, which killed 168. While this, of course, would be tragic, it would not constitute a mass casualty attack sufficiently large in scale to reorient American national security policy completely as the 9/11 attacks did.

B. Al Qaeda's threat to American interests and allies overseas.

The threat posed by al Qaeda to American interests and allies overseas continues to be somewhat high. Despite all the pressure placed on al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan since 9/11, training has continued in Pakistan's tribal areas and is the common link between the terrorist group's "successes" and its near-misses since then; for instance, the deadliest terrorist attack in British history -- the four suicide bombings on London's transportation system on July 7, 2005, which killed 52 commuters -- was directed by al Qaeda from the tribal regions.

The four bombs that detonated in London on what became known as 7/7 were all hydrogen peroxide-based devices. This has become something of a signature of plots that have a connection to Pakistani training camps. Two weeks after the 7/7 attacks on July 21, 2005 there was a second wave of hydrogen peroxide-based bombs set off in London, this one organized by a cell of Somali and Eritrean men who were first-generation immigrants to the U.K. Luckily their bombs were ineffective.

Hydrogen peroxide-based bombs would again be the signature of a cell of British Pakistanis who plotted to bring down seven passenger jets flying to the United States and Canada from the U.K. during the summer of 2006. The plotters distilled hydrogen peroxide to manufacture liquid explosives, which they assembled in an apartment-turned-bomb factory in East London that they had recently purchased for the cash equivalent of some $200,000. The case resulted in the immediate ban of all carry-on liquids and gels, and rules were later put in place to limit the amounts of these items that travelers could bring on planes.

The 'planes plot' conspirators were arrested in August 2006 and in subsequent congressional testimony Lieutenant General Michael Maples, the head of the US Defense Intelligence Agency, said the plot was "directed by al Qaeda leadership in Pakistan."[i]

During the trial of the eight men accused in the 'planes plot' the prosecution argued that some 1,500 passengers would have died if all seven planes had been brought down. The plot, which was entering its final stages in the summer of 2006, seemed designed to "celebrate" the upcoming fifth anniversary of 9/11 by once again targeting commercial aviation, a particular obsession of al Qaeda. Most of the victims of the attacks would have been Americans, Britons and Canadians.

The seriousness of the intent of the plotters can be seen in the fact that six of them made "martyrdom" videotapes recovered by British investigators. At their trial prosecutors played the video made by the ringleader, 25-year old Abdullah Ahmed Ali. Against a backdrop of a black flag adorned with flowing Arabic script and dressed in a Palestinian-style black-and-white checkered head scarf. Ali lectured into the camera, "Sheikh Osama warned you many times to leave our lands or you will be destroyed. Now the time has come for you to be destroyed."

Last month, Ali and two of his co-conspirators were found guilty of planning to blow up the transatlantic airliners. Some of the key evidence against them was emails they had exchanged with their handler in Pakistan Rashid Rauf, a British citizen who has worked closely with al Qaeda, who ordered them "to get a move on" with their operation in an email he sent them on July 25, 2006.[2] Those emails were intercepted by American spy agencies which led to the arrests of Ali and his cell.

Pakistan's tribal regions have continued to attract Westerners intent on inflicting jihadist mayhem against American targets, like the two Germans and a Turk residing in Germany who were planning to bomb the massive US Ramstein airbase there in 2007. Before their arrests, the men had obtained 1,600 pounds of industrial strength hydrogen peroxide, enough to make a number of large bombs.

Today the al Qaeda the organization continues to pose a substantial threat to US interests overseas and could still pull off an attack that would kill hundreds of Americans as was the plan during the 'planes plot' of 2006. No Western country is more threatened by al Qaeda than the United Kingdom, although a spate of arrests and successful prosecutions over the past four years have degraded the terrorist's group's capability in the UK.

C. Factors putting pressure on Al Qaeda and allied groups.

Al Qaeda is today facing a combination of circumstances that is putting a great deal of pressure on the organization, including ramped-up American drone attacks in the tribal regions of Pakistan where the group is headquartered; far better intelligence on militants based in those tribal areas; increasingly negative Pakistani public and governmental attitudes towards militant jihadist groups based in Pakistan; and similar sentiments among publics and governments around the Muslim world in general.

1. Drone attacks.

The relatively slow pace of drone attacks against al Qaeda's leaders quickened dramatically in the waning six months of the Bush administration after it had become clear that the terror group was reconstituting itself in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).[3]

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 FATA. 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. Al 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 have ended up dead or in prison.

Other leading militants killed in the drone strikes include Abu Sulayman Al Jazairi, an Algerian jihadist; Abu Khabab al Masri, a WMD expert; Abdul Rehman, a Taliban commander in South Waziristan; 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.

One consistent target of the drone attacks has been the South Waziristan stronghold of Baitullah Mehsud, the leader of the Pakistani Taliban. American and Pakistani officials identify Mehsud as the mastermind of Benazir Bhutto's assassination in December 2007. He was killed in a drone strike in early August.

None of the strikes has targeted Osama bin Laden, who seems to have vanished like a wraith.

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," he explained. Hayden went on to say that the key outcome of the

drone attacks was that "we force them to spend more time and resources on self-preservation, and that distracts them, at least partially and at least for a time, from laying the groundwork for the next attack."[4]

This strategy seems to have worked, at least in terms of limiting the ability of al Qaeda and other FATA-based militant groups to plan or carry out attacks in the West. Since the summer of 2008 when the drone program was ramped up, law enforcement authorities have uncovered only one plot against American targets traceable back to Pakistan's tribal regions (the Zazi case mentioned above).

President Obama has not only continued the ramped-up drone program he inherited from President Bush, he has ratcheted it up further. In 2007, there were three drone strikes in Pakistan; in 2008, there were 34; and, by the date of this hearing in early October 2009, the Obama administration has already authorized 39.

Two officials familiar with the drone program point out that the number of "spies" al Qaeda and the Taliban have killed has risen dramatically in the past year, suggesting that the militants are turning on themselves in an effort to root out the sources of the often pinpoint intelligence that has led to what those officials describe as the deaths of half of the top militant leaders in the FATA. This death rate also demonstrates that American intelligence operations have dramatically improved in FATA.

One way of measuring the pain that the drone program has inflicted on al Qaeda is the number of audio-and videotapes that the terrorist group has released through its propaganda arm, *As-Sahab* ("the clouds" in Arabic). 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, *As-Sahab* had a banner year, releasing almost 100 tapes. But the number of releases dropped by half in 2008, indicating that the group's leaders were more concerned with survival than public relations. However, since the beginning of 2009, al Qaeda is on track to produce a record number of tapes, suggesting that its media arm has moved from the FATA deeper into Pakistan, likely to cities such as Peshawar.

There are three important caveats about the success of the drone operations: First, the Afghan-American Najibullah Zazi was still able to receive training on explosives from al Qaeda in the tribal regions of Pakistan during the fall of 2009 *after* the drone program had been dramatically ramped up there. Second, militant organizations like al Qaeda are not like an organized crime family, which can be put out of business if most or all of the members of the family are captured or killed. Al Qaeda has sustained and can continue to sustain enormous blows that would put other organizations out of business because the members of the group firmly believe that they are doing God's work and tactical setbacks do not matter in the short run. Third, it is highly unlikely that the drone program will be expanded from FATA into other non-tribal regions of Pakistan because of intense Pakistani opposition to such a move. Understanding that fact, some militants have undoubtedly moved out of FATA and into safer parts of Pakistan.

2. Increasingly negative Pakistani attitudes toward 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; a cell phone video recording of militants executing a couple for supposed adultery -- 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.[5]

In fact, arguably not since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 have American strategic interests and Pakistani strategic interests so closely aligned. This month it looks virtually certain that the Pakistani military will launch an operation into Waziristan in FATA against the militants based there. That comes on the heels of an aggressive American drone campaign in the Waziristan region that Pakistani leaders have privately encouraged.

Support for suicide bombing has dropped from 33% to 5% 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.[6] When Baitullah Meshud -- the Taliban leader who had unleashed his suicide bombers across Pakistan in the past two years-- was killed two months ago in a US drone strike, the tone of the Pakistani media coverage was celebratory. "Good Riddance, Killer Baitullah" was the lead headline in the quality *Dawn* newspaper.[7]

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 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 largest 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 13% in the past seven years and in Jordan from 43% to 12%.[8]

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 Oudah, 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?"[9]

What was noteworthy about Al Oudah'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 Oudah'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. His sermons against the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia following Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait helped turn bin Laden against the United States. And bin Laden told CNN in

1997 that Al Oudah's 1994 imprisonment by the Saudi regime was one of the reasons he was calling for attacks on U.S. targets. Al Oudah is also one of 26 Saudi clerics who, in 2004, handed down a religious ruling urging Iraqis to fight the U.S. occupation of their country. He is, in short, not someone al Qaeda can paint as either an American sympathizer or a tool of the Saudi government.

More doubt about al Qaeda was planted in the Muslim world when Sayyid Imam Al Sharif, the ideological godfather of al Qaeda who is also known as Dr. Fadl, sensationally withdrew his support in a book written last year from his prison cell in Cairo. Dr Fadl ruled that al Qaeda's bombings in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere were illegitimate and that terrorism against civilians in Western countries was wrong. He also took on Al Qaeda's leaders directly in an interview with *Al Hayat* newspaper describing "bin Laden and other leaders of al Qaeda as "extremely immoral…I have spoken about this in order to warn the youth against them, youth who are seduced by them, and don't know them."[10]

And leaders of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, which was once loosely aligned with al Qaeda, have this past summer officially turned against the terrorist group issuing statements against al Qaeda from their prison cells in Libya and their offices in London. This is the first time that an affiliate has withdrawn its support from al Qaeda.

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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Having examined some of the factors that are damaging al Qaeda, let us now turn to the factors that continue to weigh in the terrorist group's favor.

1. Preservation of the group's leadership.

The two top 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 a Danish newspaper as a "catastrophe" for which punishment would soon be meted out. Three months later, an al Qaeda suicide attacker bombed the Danish Embassy in Islamabad, killing six.

2. **Al Qaeda's ideological influence on other jihadist groups is on the rise in South Asia.**

This influence has been particularly marked on the Taliban on both sides of the Afghan/Pakistan border. The Taliban were a quite provincial group when they ran Afghanistan before 9/11 and many of their leaders opposed bin Laden's presence in their country on the grounds that he was interfering with their quest for recognition by the international community. But since the 9/11 attacks the leadership of the Taliban has adopted al Qaeda's worldview and see themselves as part of a supposedly global jihadist movement. They have also imported wholesale al Qaeda's tactics of planting roadside bombs and ordering suicide attacks and beheadings of hostages, which until recently were largely unknown in Pakistan and Afghanistan. These tactics are a key reason why the Taliban insurgencies have become far more effective on both sides of the Durand line in the past three years.

One of the key leaders of the Afghan Taliban as it surged in strength in 2006 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. In interviews with al Jazeera and CBS Dadullah conceded what was obvious as the violence dramatically expanded in Afghanistan: that the Taliban had increasingly morphed together tactically and ideologically with al Qaeda. He said, "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."[11] Mullah Dadullah explained that bin Laden himself had supervised the suicide operation targeting Vice President Dick Cheney in Bagram Air Force base during his visit to Afghanistan on February 27, 2007, an attack that killed nearly two dozen, including an American soldier. The US military dismissed that claim but said that another al Qaeda leader Abu Laith al Libi was behind the operation, which seemed more of a confirmation than a denial of al Qaeda's role in the attack.[12]

And 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 dispatched a team of would-be suicide bombers to Barcelona in January 2008. Pakistani Taliban spokesman Maulvi Omar confirmed this in August in a 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.[13]

And the Mumbai attacks of 2008 show that al Qaeda's ideas about attacking Western and Jewish targets have also spread to Kashmiris militant groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), that had previously focused only on Indian targets. On November 28, 2008 LeT burst on to the international stage with its multiple attacks in Mumbai on two five star hotels housing Westerners, a Jewish center and a train station. The attacks showed that LeT had learned from the al Qaeda playbook of multiple simultaneous attacks on symbolic Western and Jewish targets.

3. Al Qaeda's affiliates in the Middle East and Africa are proving resilient.

In 2008 there was a sense that al Qaeda in Iraq was on the verge of defeat. The American ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker said last May, "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."[14] Certainly al Qaeda in Iraq 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 fact that American officials say that it pulled off the bombings in central Baghdad on August 19 that destroyed two Iraqi ministry buildings and killed more than one hundred.

And al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) could regain a role in Iraq despite its much weakened state today. There are some signs that AQI is trying to learn from its mistake of imposing Taliban-style social policies on the Iraqi population. One of AQI's leaders in January 2008 issued a directive to his flock, "Do not interfere in social issues such as head covering…and other social affairs which are against our religion until further notice."[15] AQI could 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, after all, despite its largely foreign leadership, AQI is made up of mostly Iraqis. Also Iraqi officials believe that AQI is entering into new marriages of convenience with Sunni nationalist groups that only two years ago it was at war with.

Similarly 'Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula,' which has taken a punishing beating from the Saudi government in the past several years, remains capable of pulling off significant attacks. The group almost succeeded in killing Saudi Arabia's leading counterterrorism official Prince Mohammed bin Nayef in August. A Saudi government official characterized it as a "miracle" that the al Qaeda assassin, who had secreted a bomb in his underwear, did not manage to kill the prince.[16] And in neighboring Yemen the group has found something of a safe haven taking advantage of the weak government control of that country.

In Africa, the Somali Islamist insurgent group *Al Shabbab* pledged allegiance to bin Laden last month and has recruited dozens of Somali-American and other Muslims from the United States, including two Americans who have conducted suicide operations there, the first US citizens to undertake suicide missions anywhere. And the North African group Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has in the past two years since it announced its alliance with al Qaeda conducted a wide range of operations including bombing the United Nations building in Algiers, murdering French tourists and attacking the Israeli embassy in Mauritania, and in May executing a British citizen in Mali who the group had kidnapped earlier in the year.

Future Al Qaeda Targeting and Tactics.

1. Commercial Aviation

From the so-called shoe bomber Richard Reid to the 9/11 attacks to the 'planes plot' of 2006 attacking commercial aviation continues to preoccupy al Qaeda and its allies. In 2007 two British doctors who are reported to have had links to al Qaeda in Iraq attempted to crashed a SUV they had set on fire into an entrance at Glasgow airport. And in 2002 an al Qaeda affiliate in Kenya almost succeeded in bringing down an Israeli passenger jet with a surface to air missile. And in 2003 a plane belonging to the DHL courier service was struck by a surface to air missile as it took off from Baghdad airport. The same year militants cased Riyadh airport and were planning to attack British Airways flights flying into Saudi Arabia. Bringing down a commercial jet with a missile and attacking an airport will remain important goals for al Qaeda, goals that could well be realized in coming years.

2. Western economic targets, particularly hotels.

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.

Al Qaeda and its affiliated terrorist groups are also increasingly targeting companies that have distinctive Western brand names. In 2003, suicide attackers bombed the J.W. Marriott hotel in Jakarta and attacked it again this year. They also attacked the Ritz Carlton hotel in the Indonesian capital. Similarly a Marriott was bombed in Islamabad Pakistan in 2008. In 2002 a group of a dozen French defense contractors were killed as they left a Sheraton hotel in Karachi, Pakistan, which was heavily damaged. In October 2004 in Taba, Egyptian jihadists attacked a Hilton Hotel. In Amman, Jordan in November 2005, al Qaeda in Iraq attacked three hotels with well known American brand names-- the Grand Hyatt, Radisson and Days Inn.

3. Attacking Israeli/Jewish targets

Attacking Jewish and Israeli targets 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 a 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. As mentioned above, one of al Qaeda's North African affiliates attacked the Israeli embassy in Mauritania in 2008.

4. American suicide bombers?

The news that two American citizens have engaged in suicide operations in Somalia raises the possibility that such operations could also 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 walked into Mike's Place, a jazz club near the American Embassy in Tel Aviv, the Israeli capital. Once inside one of the men succeeded in detonating a bomb, killing himself and three bystanders, while the other man fled the scene. Similarly, Birmingham-born Mohammed Bilal blew himself up outside an army barracks in Indian-held Kashmir in December 2000, killing six Indian soldiers and three Kashmiri students, becoming the first British suicide bomber.

Despite these suicide attacks the British security services had concluded after 9/11 that suicide bombings by British citizens would not be much of a domestic concern in the U.K. itself. Then came the four suicide attackers in London on July 7 2005, which ended that complacent attitude.

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Some comments on American policy in Afghanistan and what it means for al Qaeda.

Why is the Afghan-Pakistan safe haven so important to al Qaeda? The answer lies in its own history. Al Qaeda was founded in Pakistan in 1988 by bin Laden and some one dozen other militants who had cut their teeth in the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan. And bin Laden and Zawahiri have spent most of their adult lives in Afghanistan and Pakistan arriving in the region for the first time respectively in the early- and mid-1980s, so it's an area they are deeply familiar with. In recent years Zawahiri has even married into a local tribe. And al Qaeda's leaders have had close relations going back to the mid-1980s with key Taliban leaders based along the Afghan-Pakistan border such as the Haqqani family and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

If the Taliban did come back to power in Afghanistan, *of course* they would give safe haven to al Qaeda. Despite all the pressures military and otherwise exerted on them over the past decade, giving safe haven to al Qaeda has been at the heart of the Taliban project; first in the five years before 9/11 when they ran Afghanistan, and since then in the areas of Pakistan's tribal regions that they now control. Taliban leader Mullah Omar was prepared to lose everything on the point of principle that he would not give up Osama bin Laden after the 9/11 attacks. And he did lose everything: after 9/11, the Taliban were swiftly removed from power by U.S. forces. This does not suggest a talent for *realpolitik*. Foreign policy "realists" often take the view that everyone else is also a realistic and rational as they are, but history does not provide much comfort in this matter.

In a speech in August, President Obama laid out the rationale for stepping up the fight in Afghanistan: "If left unchecked, the Taliban insurgency will mean an even larger safe haven from which al Qaeda would plot to kill more Americans. So this is not only a war worth fighting. This is fundamental to the defense of our people." Obama's 'Af-Pak' plan is, in essence, a counter-sanctuary strategy that denies safe havens to the Taliban and al Qaeda, with the overriding goal of making America and its allies safer.

This is a sound policy. If U.S. forces were not in Afghanistan, the Taliban, with its al Qaeda allies in tow, would seize control of the country's south and east and might even take it over entirely. A senior Afghan politician told me that the Taliban would be in Kabul within 24 hours without the presence of international forces. This is not because the Taliban is so strong; generous estimates suggest it numbers no more than 20,000 fighters. It is because the Afghan government and the 90,000-man Afghan army are still so weak.

The objections to an increased U.S. military commitment in South Asia rest on a number of flawed assumptions. The first is that Afghans always treat foreign forces as antibodies. In fact, poll after poll since the fall of the Taliban has found that a majority of Afghans have a favorable view of the international forces in their country. A BBC/ABC News poll conducted this year, for instance, showed that 63% of Afghans have a favorable view of the U.S. military.[17] To those who say you can't trust polls taken in Afghanistan, it's worth noting that the same type of poll consistently finds neighboring Pakistan to be one of the most anti-American countries in the world.

Another common criticism is that Afghanistan is a cobbled-together agglomeration of warring tribes and ethnic factions that is not amenable to anything approaching nation-building. In fact, the first Afghan state emerged with the Durrani Empire in 1747, making it a nation older than the U.S. Afghans lack no sense of nationhood; rather, they have always been ruled by a weak central state.

A third critique is that Afghanistan is simply too violent for anything constituting success to happen there. This is highly misleading. While violence is on the rise, it is nothing on the scale of what occurred during the Iraq war -- or even what happened in U.S. cities as recently as 1991, when an American was statistically more likely to be killed than an Afghan civilian is to die in the war.[18] Finally, critics of greater U.S. involvement suggest that there is no realistic model for a successful end state in Afghanistan. In fact, there is a good one relatively close at hand: Afghanistan as it was in the 1970s, a country at peace internally and with its neighbors, whose towering mountains and exotic peoples drew tourists from around the world.

These flawed assumptions underlie the misguided argument that the war in Afghanistan is unwinnable. Some voices have begun to advocate a much smaller mission in Afghanistan, fewer troops and a decapitation strategy aimed at militant leaders carried out by special forces and drone attacks. Superficially, this sounds reasonable. But it has a back-to-the-future flavor because it is more or less the exact same policy that the Bush Administration followed in the first years of the occupation: a light footprint of several

thousand U.S. soldiers who were confined to counterterrorism missions. That approach helped foster the resurgence of the Taliban, which continues to receive material support from elements in Pakistan. If a pared-down counterterrorism strategy works no better the second time around, will the United States have to invade Afghanistan all over again in the event of a spectacular Taliban comeback?

Having overthrown the ruling government in 2001, the U.S. has an obligation to leave to Afghans a country that is somewhat stable. And a stabilized Afghanistan is a necessary precondition for a peaceful South Asia, which is today the epicenter of global terrorism and the most likely setting of a nuclear war. Obamas 'Af-Pak' plan has a real chance to achieve a stable Afghanistan if it is given some time to work.[19]

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