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Homeland Security

Hearing on “Understanding the Threat to the Homeland from Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)”

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Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee:

More than 12 years after the September 11 attacks, and two and a half years into the Middle East uprisings, the United States continues to face dangerous threats on a daily basis from that region of the world. Complicated security and political dynamics present new challenges for U.S. national security in the Middle East, and new threats posed by a number of Islamist terrorist networks affiliated with Al Qaeda in transition have emerged across the region.

That is why it is important to take opportunities such as today's hearing to step back from the daily events, assess the security implications of the recent changes in the Middle East, and focus in on the overall status of the Al Qaeda network and the particular threats posed by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP.

At the outset, it is worth noting that more than a decade after the September 11 attacks transformed the way we as a nation view these threats, the United States still lacks the overall ability to assess strategically whether the government is properly matching resources to meet the threats posed by these various terrorist networks.

The United States has invested in many new sophisticated means to collect intelligence on a range of terrorist networks, and it has substantially enhanced its capabilities to take action against these networks through various kinetic actions, targeting financial networks, and countering propaganda produced by terrorist groups. The use of new technologies and weapons systems by the United States has been a stunning revolution. The U.S. government has become more capable in reacting and responding to new threats.

But the United States still lacks an overarching strategy that anticipates the emergence of new threats and adapts nimbly to fast changes within terrorist networks. America's ability to assess the overall strategy to counter terrorist networks around the world remains limited and hampered by bureaucratic challenges. In sum, the United States still lacks clear and discernible metrics that can help senior policymakers assess whether the current strategic focus of all U.S. government efforts to protect the homeland from terrorist attacks has the right priorities, objectives, and tactics to reinforce the strategy. The U.S. counterterrorism efforts to respond to the threats posed by AQAP in Yemen is a prime example of a series of tactical efforts producing some successes and some failures, but all of these efforts are nested in a weak overarching strategy lacking sufficient focus on the long-term investments necessary to help produce sustainable security.

Current state of Al Qaeda and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

Since 2008, Al Qaeda's core organization in Pakistan has suffered a series of severe losses, including the death of founder Osama bin Laden at the hands of U.S. forces in 2011. These continuing losses have sufficiently harmed the group such that, according to the U.S. director of national intelligence's March 2013 worldwide threat assessment, core Al Qaeda "is probably unable to carry out complex, large-scale

attacks in the West.”¹ As a result, the major threats posed by Al Qaeda are increasingly less about the core organization that attacked the United States on September 11, 2001, and more related to a series of local and regional organizations sharing a common ideology.

The most dangerous of these more local organizations is AQAP, which represents a hybrid of the transnational core Al Qaeda organization on the one hand and largely regional groups like Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM, or the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS. Whereas core Al Qaeda remains focused on global strategic goals, groups such as AQIM and ISIS focus primarily on national or regional objectives. By contrast, AQAP pursues both local goals and attacks against the United States and other international targets.

One possible reason for this hybrid focus is a stronger organizational tie between AQAP and core Al Qaeda. Yemen served as a core Al Qaeda communications hub prior to the 9/11 attacks. Before 9/11, Al Qaeda elements attacked the USS Cole in Aden in October 2000. AQAP’s leader, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, had served as bin Laden’s personal secretary and was in Afghanistan prior to the fall of the Taliban in 2001. He was also part of the February 2006 jailbreak in Yemen that preceded the formation of AQAP, and was tapped this summer to serve as core Al Qaeda’s “general manager” by Ayman al-Zawahiri.²

The 2006 jailbreak is a seminal moment that contributed to the eventual creation of AQAP. Along with Wuhayshi, 22 other jailed Al Qaeda members escaped. By September 2006, Al Qaeda in Yemen, or AQY, was conducting large-scale suicide terrorist attacks against Yemeni oil facilities. In 2008, AQY conducted a series of attacks against Western diplomatic and Yemeni government facilities, including an attack with multiple car bombs outside the U.S. embassy that killed 13 in September 2008.³

In January 2009, AQY merged with the remnants of the Al Qaeda organization in Saudi Arabia that had been conducting attacks in the Kingdom since 2003 to form AQAP. During the last four years, AQAP has come to form the most direct terrorist threat to the United States, as direct threats to U.S. homeland security from Pakistan reduced in part due to the aggressive counterterrorism efforts pursued since 2008 there.

In the past four years, AQAP has attempted multiple attacks against the United States, including the Christmas 2009 underwear bomb plot against a U.S.-bound airliner, the October 2010 parcel bomb plot, and most recently last summer’s shutdown of U.S. diplomatic facilities across the Middle East. This threat has prompted the United States to become directly involved in Yemen, conducting an active campaign against AQAP in coordination with the Yemeni government and other governments in the region.

Moreover, AQAP has sought to foment “lone wolf” attacks in the West via propaganda such as the English-language *Inspire* online magazine. AQAP ideologues like Anwar al-Awlaki and *Inspire* have been implicated in several attacks, including the 2009 Fort Hood shooting and the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing.⁴ Despite the elimination of Awlaki and *Inspire* editor-in-chief Samir Khan in a U.S. airstrike in September 2011, AQAP’s desire to spread violence to the West by encouraging attacks by individuals heretofore unaffiliated with terrorist organizations remains. This approach has also been encouraged by core Al Qaeda leader Zawahiri in his latest tape recording.⁵

AQAP maintains a strong regional focus—particularly against the governments of Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Yemeni and Saudi officials have been the targets of AQAP attacks since the group’s formation in 2009, most notably an attempt against Saudi Arabia’s then-counterterrorism chief Prince Mohammed bin Nayef. Saudi intelligence also played a crucial role in disrupting a May 2012 AQAP plot to bomb a U.S.-bound airliner with an improved underwear explosive.⁶ The threats posed by AQAP produced incentives for several countries in the region to work more closely with the United States on counterterrorism efforts, most notably Saudi Arabia, which hosts a drone base from which the United States conducts operations against AQAP in Yemen.⁷

Beyond direct action against the Saudi and Yemeni governments, AQAP has also served as a key interlocutor with other Al Qaeda-linked terrorist branches. For instance, AQAP has provided weapons and training to Somalia’s al-Shabaab group according to the guilty plea of Ahmed Warsame.⁸ AQAP leader Wuhayshi has also been in contact with the leaders of AQIM according to documents found in Mali following the French intervention against jihadist forces there in January 2013.⁹

Outside of its obvious role in Yemen, AQAP has played little role in the ongoing political transitions in the region. A number of other jihadist groups have played more direct roles in North African states such as Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt. AQAP’s influence there is likely limited to advice and possible support. In Yemen, AQAP has sought to take advantage of the chaos and uncertainty surrounding the transition from the Saleh regime to take and hold territory. However, this effort has been met with a U.S.-supported Yemeni government counteroffensive that has in part reversed AQAP’s gains. AQAP’s wider regional role has therefore been limited, which is somewhat expected given its previous focus on Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the West.

Assessment of U.S. efforts against AQAP

The United States became directly involved in efforts against AQAP in December 2009, when the Obama administration launched a cruise missile strike against AQAP targets in order to prevent “an imminent attack against a U.S. asset.”¹⁰ (This strike is also believed to have unfortunately killed dozens of civilians.) The U.S. air campaign against AQAP began in earnest in May 2011, when the United States launched the first of 14 airstrikes in Yemen that year. Subsequently, the United States conducted 54 airstrikes in Yemen in 2012 and 23 thus far in 2013.¹¹

This policy has scored several tactical successes in eliminating key AQAP leaders and helping the Yemeni government reverse AQAP’s battlefield advances. In addition to Awlaki and Khan, U.S. airstrikes in Yemen have killed a number of AQAP leaders from Abdul Munim Salim al-Fatahani, Fahd al-Quso, and Muhammad Saeed al-Umda in 2012,¹² to Saeed al-Shehri, then AQAP’s second-in-command, and Qaeed al-Dhahab in 2013.¹³ In addition to their roles in AQAP, Fatahani and Quso were both believed to have been involved in the Cole bombing, and Quso likely was involved in supporting the 9/11 hijackers as well. Umda was believed to have been involved in the 2002 attack on the oil tanker Limburg.

The recent shift toward regional plots, as evidenced by the regional embassy closures this summer, suggests a possible degradation of AQAP’s capability to mount plots outside the Middle East.

These tactical successes, however, are not reinforced by a broader, more coherent U.S. policy to promote Yemen's transition to democracy under President Abdo Rabu Mansour Hadi. There is an inherent tension between the long-term objective of supporting a transition to a stable democracy in Yemen and the short-term imperative of preventing terrorist attacks against the United States and our allies and partners in the region. This short-term imperative is being at a quicker speed than the more difficult problem of transitioning a developing country from authoritarianism to democracy. This transition cannot be accomplished at a pace that will solve the immediate and pressing security challenge presented by AQAP.

However, it is possible for the United States to try and better link these short- and long-term policies. Doing so will be difficult, but offers a chance to translate recent tactical success into long-term stability. President Hadi has recently outlined the progress made in Yemen's political transition,¹⁴ and should be commended and supported as the transition continues. Encouraging Yemen's National Dialogue to be as inclusive as possible to include Southern Yemenis and those outside the capital, Sanaa, will be important, as will ensuring the Yemeni government meets its commitments on human rights and democratic reforms.

Of particular importance going forward will be support for security sector reform. Despite some progress in purging the security services of Saleh loyalists,¹⁵ developing an effective and professional security sector capable of tackling AQAP with minimal U.S. support will likely take time.

In short, the United States should make every effort to sync up the imperatives of its short-term fight against AQAP with the long-term goal of a stable and developing Yemeni democracy that is able to provide for its own security. This effort will be difficult, but not impossible.

Next phase of U.S. policy

The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan next year is unlikely to have a major impact on either core Al Qaeda or AQAP. Assuming a bilateral security agreement between the United States and Afghanistan is concluded, U.S. forces will remain in Afghanistan to conduct operations against core Al Qaeda if and when necessary. However, core Al Qaeda is less important today than before its evisceration began in 2008. Branch Al Qaeda organizations such as AQIM and ISIS are likely to prove greater challenges to U.S. interests even if they do not directly target the U.S. homeland.

AQAP is a hybrid organization that maintains a dual focus on international targets such as the U.S. homeland and more local and regional goals such as fighting the Yemeni and Saudi governments. It will therefore rightly receive more attention from U.S. policymakers than AQIM, ISIS, or the myriad jihadist groups operating in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. While these groups operate in regions with equally good prospects for serving as a terrorist "safe haven," they do not as yet present the same direct threat to the U.S. homeland or regional interests as AQAP.

However, the proliferation of jihadist militant groups does present a potential recruitment problem for AQAP and core Al Qaeda. In particular, Syria's civil war has provided a magnet for both jihadi funding

and recruitment. Increased lawlessness in the Sinai may prove a more attractive prospect for militants than fighting in Yemen, particularly in the wake of the Muslim Brotherhood's ouster from power in Egypt, and AQIM's activities in North Africa present another possible syphon of recruits and funding. In short, AQAP is facing greater competition from other jihadist groups for potential recruits. Paradoxically, this competition may both serve and harm American interests by drawing jihadi funding and recruitment away from AQAP, the only non-core Al Qaeda organization that directly targets the U.S. homeland, and toward various other groups that pose threats both to U.S. regional interests and the citizens of the region itself.

While it remains appropriate for U.S. policy to concentrate on the threat posed by AQAP, policymakers should begin re-evaluating the threat posed by Al Qaeda to take into account its evolution from the core organization that attacked the United States on 9/11. AQAP serves as an example of Al Qaeda's transition from a core organization based in Afghanistan and Pakistan with grandiose global objectives to a series of largely independent but mutually supportive branch offices with a more local and regional focus. These movements still pose a threat to the United States and its allies, but the nature of these threats are constantly changing.

These changes and transitions within terrorist networks such as AQAP require a more strategic and nimble policy approach by the United States. The Middle East has entered a difficult and complicated period of transitions, one that will likely be prolonged and will present new challenges for U.S. security. Syria's civil war, ongoing unrest in Egypt, Iran's role in supporting terrorist groups around the region, and the unsettled security situations in Yemen and Libya all present substantial challenges to U.S. security.

During the last 12 years, the United States has increased its capabilities to identify, target, and act against a range of terrorist networks operating in the Middle East. What it has not succeeded in doing is helping the countries and governments of the region develop their own institutions that possess sufficient capability and political legitimacy to produce the long-term gains necessary ultimately to defeat the threats posed by groups like Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

Endnotes

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