

House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa,
and International Terrorism

Examining the Global Terrorism Landscape

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Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, and other distinguished committee members, thank you for inviting me to testify today to examine the global terror landscape.

The Easter day bombings in Sri Lanka serve as a stark reminder that our enemies are committed to their cause and are willing to go to any lengths to destroy our way of life. Nine suicide bombers, many of them well educated, including two sons of a wealthy spice tycoon, and a pregnant woman, killed more than 250 people during attacks on churches and hotels.¹ The suicide bombers swore allegiance to Islamic State emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi before carrying out their heinous attacks.²

The Sri Lanka bombings took place just one month after the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) declared a victory over the Islamic State.³ While the Islamic State may have lost its physical caliphate in Iraq and Syria, it is by no means defeated.

For today's hearing, you ask us to examine the landscape of global terrorism. My testimony will focus on the threat from both Sunni jihadists and Shiite militias backed by Iran, as well as other state sponsors of terrorism.

In short, the jihadist threat has become more diverse since the horrific attack on September 11, 2001. Prior to 9/11, al-Qaeda maintained a base in Afghanistan and fought alongside the Taliban, operating primarily at the cellular level in several other countries throughout Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. Al-Qaeda's base in Afghanistan was key to allowing it to recruit and train its cadre of global operatives for attacks against the U.S. and its allies. Iran's primary proxy was Hezbollah in Lebanon, and it also supported Palestinian terrorist groups against Israel.

Since 9/11, al-Qaeda's footprint has greatly expanded. It has established branches in Yemen and Saudi Arabia (al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula); North and West Africa (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, or JNIM); Somalia and East Africa (Shabaab); Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar (al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent); and in Syria. In many of these countries, al-Qaeda maintains an active insurgency, and in some, al-Qaeda's branches or allies control a significant amount of land.

However, al-Qaeda is no longer the only global jihadist actor. The Islamic State, which arose from a dispute between al-Qaeda branches in Iraq and Syria, now rivals its parent group in many ways. The Islamic State has what it calls "provinces" in countries spanning from West Africa through East Africa and into the Middle East, all the way to Southeast Asia. Since it declared its so-called caliphate in 2014, the Islamic State has taken credit for most of the Sunni jihadist attacks in the West, including operations that were inspired or directed by the group.

¹ Kai Schultz, "Sri Lanka Calls Bombers 'Well Educated' and Warns of Ongoing Threat," *The New York Times*, April 24, 2019. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/24/world/asia/sri-lanka-bombings.html>)

² Thomas Joscelyn, "Terrorists in Sri Lanka swore allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi," *FDD's Long War Journal*, April 23, 2019. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/04/terrorists-in-sri-lanka-swore-allegiance-to-baghdadi.php>)

³ Thomas Joscelyn, "US-backed forces declare end to Islamic State's physical caliphate," *FDD's Long War Journal*, March 23, 2019. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/03/us-backed-forces-declare-end-to-islamic-states-caliphate.php>)

Shared Goals, Differing Strategies

Our enemies share the same goal: the establishment of a global caliphate and imposition of their harsh brand of *sharia*, or Islamic law. However, they disagree on how to achieve this objective. After decades of fighting, al-Qaeda has concluded that its best chance of success will come by working alongside local jihadist and Islamist insurgencies, as well as tribes and clans, in order to overthrow the existing governments and regimes. Al-Qaeda has had some success with co-opting these local insurgencies. Al-Qaeda believes that declaring a caliphate before it could be properly defended will only lead to failure.

The Islamic State, on the other hand, has taken a more radical approach to its jihad. The Islamic State declared its caliphate in June 2014, after overrunning much of Iraq and Syria. The Islamic State demands allegiance to its caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and ruthlessly targets those who refuse to submit.

Iran, which also seeks to extend the influence of its Islamic state in the region, has excelled at establishing local Shiite militias to take up its cause. It has effectively done so in Iraq and Syria. During the U.S. surge in Iraq, Iranian-backed militias were responsible for killing more than 600 U.S. service members.⁴ After the Islamic State onslaught in Iraq in 2014, the Iraqi government called on the militias to bolster flagging Iraqi security forces.

These militias (two of which the U.S. has designated as terrorist organizations), have organized under the banner of the Popular Mobilizations Forces (PMF), which is now an official security force answerable only to Iraq's prime minister.⁵ The PMF is an organization akin to Iraq's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and some PMF commanders have sworn fealty to Iran's supreme leader and said they would overthrow the Iraqi government if ordered to do so.⁶⁷ This development should concern patriotic Iraqis. The implications of the creation of the PMF have yet to be fully understood. If the history of Hezbollah is any guide, it will not bode well for Iraq or the region.

There is one aspect of Iran's tremendous influence in Iraq that has gone virtually unreported: its access to a vast recruiting base among Iraq's Shiite population. In Lebanon, Iran stood up Hezbollah, which has waged proxy war against Israel for over three decades, by recruiting from the country's 1.65 million Shiites. Today, Hezbollah is the most influential player in Lebanon; its

⁴ Jeff Schogol, "The Pentagon says Iran killed 603 US troops during the Iraq War," *Task & Purpose*, April 3, 2019. (<https://taskandpurpose.com/iran-killed-us-troops>)

⁵ Bill Roggio and Amir Toumaj, "Iraq's prime minister establishes Popular Mobilization Forces as a permanent independent military formation," *FDD's Long War Journal*, July 28, 2016. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/07/iraqs-prime-minister-establishes-popular-mobilization-front-as-a-permanent-independent-military-formation.php>)

⁶ Bill Roggio and Caleb Weiss, "Iraqi Shiite militia leader says he would overthrow government if ordered by Iran's supreme leader," *FDD's Long War Journal*, November 12, 2015. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/11/us-designated-terrorist-of-iraqi-militia-reportedly-in-aleppo.php>)

⁷ Bill Roggio, "Iraqi militia leader wants to model PMF after Iran's Revolutionary Guard," *FDD's Long War Journal*, March 22, 2016. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/03/why-cant-the-hashd-be-like-the-revolutionary-guard-in-iran-iraqi-militia-commander-says.php>)

military eclipses the Lebanese army, and its arsenal of Iranian-supplied weapons poses a direct threat to Israel's security. In Iraq, where the polarization between Sunni and Shiite populations remains high due to nearly two decades of jihadist insurgency, Iran has a pool of more than 24 million Shiites from which to recruit.

Contrary to popular opinion and despite its open war with the Islamic State, the Iranian regime is not averse to forming pacts with Sunni jihadists to achieve its goals. Under the Obama administration, the U.S. Treasury Department outlined "Iran's secret deal with al Qaeda allowing it to funnel funds and operatives through its territory."⁸ Iran has also supported the Taliban since 2001.⁹

The Loss of the Islamic State's Physical Caliphate

In March of this year, the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces took control of the Islamic State's last stronghold in Syria, rendering it landless. While this is a welcome development, it is far too soon to declare victory.

It took a vast coalition of forces, with the U.S. and its allies on one side and the Syrian government backed by Iran and Russia on the other, more than five years to drive the Islamic State underground (the Islamic State first took control of Fallujah and much of Western Iraq in January 2014). Recent history tells us that the Islamic State may indeed return in force.

The Islamic State's predecessor, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), was a front for al-Qaeda in Iraq and controlled large areas of Iraq before it was defeated during the U.S. surge from 2006 to 2010. The ISI responded by going underground, biding its time until conditions were ripe for its reemergence. The Syrian civil war and political unrest in Iraq gave the ISI new life. By 2013, it was on the offensive.

Today, in Iraq and Syria, the conditions are ripe for the resurgence of the Islamic State. Baghdadi and many key leaders remain alive. Thousands, if not tens of thousands of Islamic State soldiers, are at the ready. The Syrian regime remains weak, and the Iraqi government's ties to Iran and its reliance on Shiite militias provides recruiting fodder for the Islamic State.

In fact, this same cycle has been seen in other theaters against jihadist enemies. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula overran several provinces in Yemen and held them for extended periods of time twice since 2011. Shabaab held Mogadishu and large areas of southern Somalia for two years between 2009 and 2011 before being driven out by African Union forces; it reorganized and today it controls 25 percent of the country.¹⁰ In Afghanistan, U.S. forces ousted the Taliban after 9/11;

⁸ Thomas Joscelyn, "Treasury targets Iran's 'secret deal' with al Qaeda," *FDD's Long War Journal*, July 28, 2011. (https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/07/treasury_targets_ira_1.php)

⁹ Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Iran has supported the Taliban's insurgency since late 2001," *FDD's Long War Journal*, May 29, 2016. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/05/analysis-iran-has-supported-the-talibans-insurgency-since-late-2001.php>)

¹⁰ Bill Roggio, "US airstrike targets Shabaab in terror haven," *FDD's Long War Journal*, April 11, 2019. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/04/us-airstrike-targets-shabaab-in-terror-haven.php>)

today, the Taliban controls at least 10 percent of the country and hotly contests another 50 percent.¹¹ Boko Haram, a jihadist group previously loyal to al-Qaeda and now part of the Islamic State, has controlled large areas of northern Nigeria several times since 2009.

There is one other major problem that exists in both Iraq and Syria: the handling of captive Islamic State fighters, particularly the ones from outside these countries, and their families. The SDF is currently holding more than 3,200 Islamic State fighters, and several thousand family members are detained in camps.¹² More than 17 years after 9/11, there is no consensus in the international community on how to deal with detainees and their families. Should citizens of Western countries be repatriated, or tried in local courts in Iraq or Syria? Some wives of Islamic State fighters remain unrepentant; their repatriation to their home countries poses serious security risks.¹³ The SDF has threatened to release these prisoners if action is not taken.

Western Will has Waned

As this long war is close to entering its third decade, one thing is clear: The West's will to continue the fight has waned. We are facing an enemy that cannot match our resources and technology, but it does possess the will to fight. We have failed to take a long approach to this war. We have viewed clashes in Iraq and Afghanistan and other countries as individual wars instead of theaters in the overall war. Make no mistake, this is how the enemy views the fight.

Our political and military leadership have failed us. Three successive administrations have failed to explain to the American public the nature of the threat and the importance in remaining engaged. Our military leaders have routinely provided rosy assessments of fights that are going badly.

Today, U.S. policymakers are largely seeking ways to disengage from the fights. Victories have been few and far between, primarily due to our inability to define the enemy and create a strategy to deal with it. We refuse to recognize there is a religious ideological component to this war, and have done little to effectively counter the jihadists' narratives.

In a rush to the exit, the U.S. is willing cut a deal with an enemy in Afghanistan that cannot be trusted and continues to shelter al-Qaeda to this day. In Syria, U.S. withdrawal will provide space for the Islamic State to regenerate its forces. We continue to coddle Pakistan, despite its perfidy in Afghanistan and its culpability in the deaths of thousands of U.S. soldiers. Our actions and inactions have consequences, and our enemies have been able to capitalize on them. As Sri Lanka reminds us: The enemy has a vote, and will not go away without a fight.

¹¹ Bill Roggio and Alexandra Gutowski, "Mapping Taliban Control in Afghanistan," *FDD's Long War Journal*, current as of April 26, 2019. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan>)

¹² Hwaida Saad and Rod Nordland, "Kurdish Fighters Discuss Releasing Almost 3,200 ISIS Prisoners," *The New York Times*, December 20, 2018. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/20/world/middleeast/isis-syria-prisoner-release-trump.html>)

¹³ Isabel Coles, "Hard-Core Islamic State Members Carry Ideology From Crushed Caliphate," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 18, 2019. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-diehard-carry-groups-ideology-from-crushed-caliphate-11552914058>); John Sparks, "'She sounded largely unrepentant': What happened when Sky News tracked down Shamima Begum," *Sky News*, February 18, 2019. (<https://news.sky.com/story/she-sounded-largely-unrepentant-what-happened-when-sky-news-tracked-down-shamima-begum-11640713>)

Recommendations

1. If the U.S. government is serious about continuing the fight against our jihadist enemies, it must regroup, reevaluate the nature of the threat, and develop a whole-of-government approach to tackle critical issues. Such issues include properly defining the nature of our enemy and recognizing its goals and strategies, combating the ideology, and developing our own strategy to fight the war over the long term. Additionally, the president must explain to the American public on a regular basis the existential threat and the need to fight a long war.
2. The U.S. must work with its allies to develop a comprehensive strategy for dealing with the issue of detainees captured on the battlefield, particularly those who are Western citizens.
3. State sponsors of terrorism, such as Pakistan, must stop being treated as key allies. Pakistan has fueled the Taliban's insurgency, sabotaged U.S. efforts to secure Afghanistan, and has the blood of American and Western soldiers and citizens on its hands. The U.S. possesses the diplomatic and economic means to punish Pakistan for its perfidy, but has been unwilling to do so.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to answering your questions.