

House Committee on Homeland Security

Global Terrorism: Threats to the Homeland, Part I

THOMAS JOSCELYN

Senior Fellow

Foundation for Defense of Democracies

Senior Editor

FDD's Long War Journal

Washington, DC
September 10, 2019

Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Rogers, and other members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today.

It is hard to believe that 18 years have passed since the September 11, 2001, hijackings. The world has changed dramatically during that time. Many in the U.S. want to move on from the fight against jihadism, including from the wars unleashed by 9/11 and America's response. I cannot say I entirely blame them. But the enemy gets a vote, and our enemies have not given up.

Many in Washington argue that "great power competition" is America's main concern, and that the U.S. needs to pivot away from protracted conflicts against the jihadists. Some argue that we can no longer afford to have our limited resources tied up in the fight against the Islamic State or al-Qaeda, because we need to focus on near-peer competitors such as China, or on spoilers like Russia. Rising challengers, and especially China, do demand more of the U.S. government's attention. But I think the resource allocation argument misses a key point: By and large, the U.S. military's pivot has already occurred. The last "surge" of American forces ended in 2011. Today, there are far fewer American troops deployed to wartime theaters than at the height of the U.S. commitment.

The U.S. has also already shifted much of the burden to its allies, as they have carried out the bulk of the on-the-ground fighting against Sunni jihadists for years. For example, Kurdish, Iraqi, and other forces played a leading role in the ground campaign against the Islamic State, ending its territorial claims in Iraq and Syria. Those same allied forces sustained the overwhelming majority of casualties in the war against the so-called caliphate. The same is true in jihadist hotspots such as Afghanistan and Somalia. Unfortunately, 16 Americans have perished as a result of the conflict in Afghanistan this year. Still, Afghan military and security forces, as well as civilians, have sustained far higher casualties.

Going forward, as the U.S. presumably draws down further, a key question is: How will America's allies continue to keep the jihadists at bay with even less external assistance? We see in Afghanistan, for instance, that the government is barely holding the Taliban and other jihadists back throughout the country. This has been the case even though approximately 14,000 American troops, along with thousands of NATO partners, have been assisting the Afghans. America's airpower and Special Forces have been essential for preventing the Taliban from capturing more ground, especially several provincial capitals. This means it is extremely unlikely that the situation will improve with less Western assistance. This does not mean that we should paper over the problems with the war effort or ignore wasteful spending. The widespread frustration with these issues is well-placed. However, there are also legitimate concerns about the threat of terrorism emanating from Afghanistan in the future.

Even though the U.S. military's footprint has been significantly reduced, America's armed forces continue to strike terrorist targets in several countries. Law enforcement and intelligence officials also continue to face a wide spectrum of threats. These include threats from the Islamic State and its global arms, al-Qaeda and its international network, as well as other foreign terrorist organizations. The Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and allied groups are fighting or operating across an enormous amount of ground, stretching from the remote regions of West Africa, through North and East Africa, into the heart of the Middle East, and all the way into Central and South Asia.

The jihadists' war is far from over. Most of the jihadists are fighting for territory over there, but new threats to American security could emerge from within their ranks at any time.

There are also ample reasons to be concerned about the rise of far-right extremism, including terrorist attacks by white supremacists or other anti-government actors. To date, most of the far-right attacks inside the U.S. have been carried out by individuals. It is far too easy for a lone terrorist to wreak havoc. And we have already witnessed how an attack in one part of the world can inspire or influence another, even half a world away.

Consider that Brenton Tarrant, the accused terrorist who massacred 51 innocent civilians at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March, claimed to be inspired by Anders Behring Breivik, who killed 77 people in Oslo in 2011, as well as by Dylan Roof, who murdered nine churchgoers in a 2015 mass shooting in Charleston.¹ Even if the Christchurch terrorist exaggerated his ties to Breivik – he claimed to be in “brief contact” with the jailed mass murderer² – the evidence shows how one far-right terrorist's words and deeds can influence the actions of another living faraway. In fact, Patrick Crusius, who has been charged with killing 22 people in August at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, reportedly wrote: “In general, I support the Christchurch shooter and his manifesto. This attack is a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas.”³ In addition to their hatred for immigrants, the gunmen in New Zealand and El Paso have also been described as “eco-fascists.”⁴ This demonstrates how different extremist ideas can be combined in the minds of would-be terrorists to produce an even more toxic hatred. Also in August, another terrorist opened fire on a mosque in Norway, injuring one. The man named as the main suspect in that attack, Philip Manshaus, reportedly drew inspiration from the killings in New Zealand and El Paso as well as from a shooting at a synagogue in California in April.⁵

I have studied jihadists for years. There are differences between the current far-right threat and that posed by groups such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. But I am struck by one similarity. The jihadists portray themselves as the guardians of Islam and its glorious past. They rely on a heavily mythologized view of history, justifying their violence by arguing that it is necessary to restore lost glory. This was a large part of the Islamic State's caliphate claim. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his henchmen wanted people to believe that an Islamic empire had been resurrected for Muslims, even though most of their victims are in fact Muslims.

There is a similarity with far-right extremism in this regard. The terrorist in Christchurch covered his weapons with historical symbols and names, portraying his wanton violence as a defense of

¹ Adam Taylor, “New Zealand suspect allegedly claimed ‘brief contact’ with Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik,” *The Washington Post*, March 15, 2019. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/03/15/new-zealand-suspect-allegedly-claimed-brief-contact-with-norwegian-mass-murderer-anders-breivik/>)

² Ibid.

³ Tim Arango, Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, and Katie Benner, “Minutes Before El Paso Killing, Hate-Filled Manifesto Appears Online,” *The New York Times*, August 3, 2019. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/03/us/patrick-crusius-el-paso-shooter-manifesto.html>)

⁴ Joel Achenbach, “Two mass killings a world apart share a common theme: ‘ecofascism,’” *The Washington Post*, August 18, 2019. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/science/two-mass-murders-a-world-apart-share-a-common-theme-ecofascism/2019/08/18/0079a676-bec4-11e9-b873-63ace636af08_story.html)

⁵ Jason Burke, “Norway mosque attack suspect ‘inspired by Christchurch and El Paso shootings,’” *The Guardian* (UK), August 11, 2019. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/11/norway-mosque-attack-suspect-may-have-been-inspired-by-christchurch-and-el-paso-shootings>)

the West against Muslims. Of course, his shootings were no such thing. But not only far-right believers were emboldened by Tarrant's historically illiterate narrative; so were some jihadists. Al-Qaeda's senior leadership and their loyalists around the globe called for revenge in the wake of the massacre in New Zealand. We collected messages from Afghanistan and Pakistan, Syria, Somalia, West Africa, and elsewhere.

One message, from Shabaab's spokesman, the appropriately named Ali Mahmoud Rage, was especially noteworthy. Rage agreed with Tarrant that Muslims have no place in the West. "We say to the Muslims in the West, wake up from your slumber, and know that you are in the den of wolves who surround you from every direction and lie around you," Rage claimed. "You are not safe from their gaze, even when you are inside the mosques." Rage continued: "O Muslims, you must realize that there is no future for you in the West, and that you must return to your countries, to participate in liberating them from the enemies and to live afterwards as Muslims, free under the shade of the Shariah and the governance of Islam."

In other words, both Tarrant and Rage portrayed themselves as the guardians of whole civilizations. Neither man is any such thing. But their hate is not all that different.

My other key points today are as follows:

1. While the Islamic State has lost its territorial caliphate and suffered other significant blows, the group lives on as a global terrorist and insurgent organization. The organization has highlighted the continued loyalty of more than a dozen of its so-called "provinces" outside of Iraq and Syria this year. Some of these are smaller operations. But its "provinces" in West Africa and the Khorasan (a region covering Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as parts of several other neighboring countries) are especially active. As was the case at the height of its power, the Islamic State's violence is focused primarily overseas.
2. To date, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's men have had far more success orchestrating professional plots in Europe than inside the U.S. This has to do with ease of travel and other logistical issues. But officials will have to continue monitoring this threat stream for some time, as Baghdadi's surviving goons would like to orchestrate a large-scale attack inside the U.S. or against American interests elsewhere. Fortunately, a number of hurdles stand in their way. But continued pressure is necessary to ensure they do not exploit any holes in America's defenses.
3. The Islamic State's threat inside the U.S. has come primarily from its remote planners or through inspiration. Many of the group's "remote-controlled" plots – that is, attacks guided by online handlers working overseas – have been thwarted, but some inspired attacks have succeeded. With the proliferation of encrypted messaging capabilities, it may become easier for the jihadists to remotely guide larger-scale plots in the future, providing bomb-making or other tactical advice to people living in the U.S. There is evidence that the Islamic State has done this elsewhere and that others, including al-Qaeda or far-right terrorists, could employ the same methods.

4. Eighteen years after 9/11, Americans have the right to wonder how much of a threat al-Qaeda is to them. The organization has failed to conduct another high-profile attack inside the U.S. Some early plots were thwarted, while others failed on their own. However, al-Qaeda is far from dead. Despite triumphalist claims about the organization's supposed demise, al-Qaeda is a global terrorist and insurgent organization. Indeed, al-Qaeda's loyalists are probably fighting in more countries today than ever before. Although this is not widely understood, al-Qaeda has devoted most of its resources to various insurgencies, seeking to build Islamic emirates that could one day join together and resurrect an Islamic caliphate. Of course, this vision is far from becoming a reality. But it does motivate much of the al-Qaeda network's violence. This central idea also explains al-Qaeda's global structure. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (also known as the "Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims"), and al-Shabaab in Somalia are all openly loyal to al-Qaeda's senior leadership and serve as regional branches of the group. In addition, there are several al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in Syria, though the organization's structure in the Levant is now a bit murky due to various bouts of infighting and disagreements over strategy. There are other al-Qaeda-linked groups elsewhere as well.
5. Al-Qaeda has not attempted a large-scale attack in the West in years, but this does not mean the threat has been entirely eliminated. Al-Qaeda deliberately chose to prioritize fighting in various theaters over spectacular, 9/11-style terrorism. There is always a possibility that al-Qaeda will decide to take a big shot at the U.S. or Europe once again. The last al-Qaeda attack in the West came in January 2015, when two brothers carried out a precisely planned assault on *Charlie Hebdo*'s offices in Paris. That attack, facilitated by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, was part of al-Qaeda's targeted global campaign against supposed blasphemers. Al-Qaeda's men wanted to portray themselves as the avengers of Islam after *Charlie Hebdo* and other publications printed allegedly offensive images of the Prophet Mohammed. Al-Qaeda has also sought to inspire individuals to lash out on their own, and has had limited success in this regard.
6. There are a variety of ways al-Qaeda could attempt a major, mass casualty attack in the West in the future. Part of the story that is often overlooked is the U.S. government's role in suppressing various emerging threats. For example, the U.S. military struck alleged al-Qaeda leaders in Syria twice this year, claiming that these unnamed individuals are "responsible for attacks threatening U.S. citizens, our partners, and innocent civilians."⁶ Previous American airstrikes in Syria have targeted al-Qaeda figures suspected of plotting against the U.S. and the West as well. In recent years, the U.S. has also taken out al-Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan and Yemen after intelligence officials learned they

⁶ U.S. Central Command, "Statement from U.S. Central Command on strike against al-Qaida in Syria," June 30, 2019. (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/STATEMENTS/Statements-View/Article/1891697/statement-from-us-central-command-on-strike-against-al-qaida-in-syria/>); see also: U.S. Central Command, "Statement from U.S. Central Command on U.S. Forces strike against al-Qaida in Syria leadership in Idlib, Syria," August 31, 2019. (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/STATEMENTS/Statements-View/Article/1949406/statement-from-us-central-command-on-us-forces-strike-against-al-qaida-in-syria/>). These airstrikes targeted Ansar al-Tawhid and Hurras al-Din (or possibly former members of the group). Both are al-Qaeda-affiliated groups operating in Idlib as well as elsewhere in Syria.

had a hand in anti-American and transregional plans.⁷ This counterterrorism campaign demonstrates how al-Qaeda's external operations planning has become more geographically dispersed over time, a direct result of the group's role in various insurgencies.

7. The Trump administration has been pursuing a deal with the Taliban as part of its effort to extricate American forces from Afghanistan, but this will not lead to peace. As the Taliban's recent actions have demonstrated – including its large-scale assaults on the cities of Kunduz and Farah, suicide bombings throughout the country, kidnapping and murder of a human rights official, and release of a video justifying the 9/11 attacks – there is no good reason to think the organization is interested in peace. The Taliban currently contests or controls more ground than at any time since 9/11. Americans' frustration with the war effort is well-placed. In my view, however, a deal with the Taliban is not necessary to withdraw American forces from Afghanistan, nor will it advance American interests. A number of regional or international terrorist organizations fight under the Taliban's banner today, and there is no indication that the Taliban will truly break with them.
8. The Taliban remains closely allied with al-Qaeda, and this is not likely to change as a result of any agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban. At *FDD's Long War Journal*, we've documented this relationship for years. In addition, four reports submitted to the United Nations Security Council since last year have warned that: Al-Qaeda is “closely allied” with the Taliban, and the group's “alliance with the Taliban and other terrorist groups in Afghanistan remains firm”;⁸ al-Qaeda's relationship with the Taliban is “long-standing” and “strong”;⁹ al-Qaeda “has grown stronger operating under the Taliban umbrella across Afghanistan and is more active than in recent years”;¹⁰ the Taliban is the “primary partner for all foreign terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan, with the exception of” the Islamic State's Khorasan branch;¹¹ al-Qaeda “members continue to function routinely as military and religious instructors for the Taliban”;¹² and al-Qaeda

⁷ Cheryl Pellerin, “Transregional Strikes Hit al-Qaida Leaders in Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, November 2, 2016. (<https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/News/Article/Article/994180/transregional-strikes-hit-al-qaida-leaders-in-syria-yemen-afghanistan/>)

⁸ United Nations Security Council, “Twenty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities,” June 27, 2018, pages 3 and 15. (<https://undocs.org/S/2018/705>)

⁹ United Nations Security Council, “Twenty-third report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities,” December 27, 2018, page 16. (https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/N1846950_EN.pdf)

¹⁰ United Nations Security Council, “Tenth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2255 (2015) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace, stability and security of Afghanistan,” April 30, 2019, page 9. (<https://www.undocs.org/S/2019/481>)

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² United Nations Security Council, “Twenty-fourth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities,” June 27, 2019, page 16. (<https://undocs.org/S/2019/570>)

“considers Afghanistan a continuing safe haven for its leadership, relying on its long-standing and strong relationship with the Taliban leadership.”¹³

9. Far-right terrorism is a global phenomenon. To date, high-profile attacks have been carried out primarily by individuals or very small cells. As the brief summary above makes clear, however, violent provocations are traveling around the world at an alarming rate. Individual terrorists are not only inspired online, but can also engage in one-upmanship, with aspiring terrorists attempting to outdo one another. Racially motivated extremist beliefs do not have to be focused exclusively on cultural or ethnic identity, but can also incorporate other radical ideas, sometimes making it difficult to distill the beliefs of a perpetrator down to a single issue. Several recent terrorist attacks have been conducted by individuals who combined far-right, anti-immigrant views with other beliefs. However, their targets – whether they are Hispanic, African-American, Muslim, Jewish, members of the LGBT community, or other civilians – indicate their primary motivations.
10. Going forward, we must be vigilant regarding the possible development of more sophisticated far-right terrorist organizations and networks with capable leaders, both inside the U.S. and abroad. There are already indications that neo-Nazis and others are organizing their online presence to make it easier for aspiring terrorists to get their hands on evil knowhow such as bomb-making techniques. As we have seen, a single shooter can terrorize a community and kill dozens. A small team of dedicated individuals could hypothetically do even more damage, especially if they combine small arms with explosives. Paramilitary or other organized training could greatly increase the threat even further. Coordination across national boundaries is also a very real concern.

¹³ Ibid., page 15.