# The Dynamic Terrorism Landscape and What It Means for America

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**Introduction**

Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Katko, and other members of the committee, thank you for inviting me here today to speak about the dynamic terrorism landscape and what it means for America.

As the American foreign policy establishment has shifted its focus from international terror organizations to great power competition with China and Russia, the terrorism threat has not receded. In some cases, it has intensified. To be clear, the challenges created by America's enemies and adversaries such as China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea must be addressed. However, we turn our back on the dangers posed by Islamic terror groups at our peril.

Make no mistake, withdrawing from conflicts against terrorist groups has not ended what has been wrongly called the "endless wars." Disengaging from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, and other countries has strengthened our enemies. Our withdrawal has given our enemies new life. Our enemies are waging an endless jihad, one where they seek to overthrow existing Muslim governments and establish emirates, with the ultimate goal of imposing a reborn Islamic caliphate. These emirates would be extremely hostile to America and would give terror groups safe haven, which the 9/11 Commission identified as a key element that allowed al-Qaeda to execute its deadly attack against the American homeland. Today, al-Qaeda has safe havens in several countries, including Afghanistan, Somalia, and Mali. And al-Qaeda continues to benefit from state sponsorship of terrorism, with Iran and Pakistan topping the list.

As wrong and counterproductive as the "endless war" narrative is, the desire to end the conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, and elsewhere is understandable, as America has spent an enormous amount of blood, treasure, and political capital since al-Qaeda attacked us on September 11, 2001, and killed nearly 3,000 of our countrymen. Poor political, military, and intelligence leadership, compounded by bad strategy and weak allies and partners, has led to exhaustion amongst our political class. Since 2009, the primary impulse among three successive administrations was to disengage from these so-called endless wars. Victory, they believed, or even holding the line against our jihadist enemies, is no longer feasible.

We can argue the merits of overthrowing Saddam Hussein, ousting the Taliban and standing up a now-defunct Afghan government, or supporting the weak Somali government. But once engaged in these conflicts, it was in America's interests to see them through and not to abandon partners, as imperfect as they are, to satisfy political expediency.

**Negotiating With the Taliban and the Withdrawal from Afghanistan**

The Trump's administration's decision to negotiate with the Taliban, and the Biden administration's decision to quickly withdraw U.S. forces without giving the Afghan government ample time to prepare, was disastrous. Both decisions directly led to the collapse of the Afghan government and military and the loss of a key partner in the region.

President Trump's negotiations with the Taliban, which excluded the Afghan government, legitimized the Taliban in the international community. The negotiations also delegitimized the

Afghan government both at home and abroad. These negotiations were predicated on the ideas that the Taliban would negotiate in good faith and join an Afghan government, respect its constitution, and preserve women's rights, all while acting as a reliable counterterrorism partner against al-Qaeda and other international terror groups. As we all witnessed last summer, these assumptions were false. The Taliban always sought to regain full control of Afghanistan and re-establish its emirate. It achieved these goals with the help of al-Qaeda and allied terror groups, all who played a key role in the Taliban's summer offensive.

President Biden doubled down on President Trump's misguided deal with the Taliban by following through on it. Biden hastily withdrew U.S. forces as the Taliban launched its offensive to seize the country. The Afghan government was not prepared — it just did not believe America would abandon it after 20 years of commitment — and was routed within four months from the day Biden announced the withdrawal. An unknown number of American citizens and residents — hundreds, if not thousands — and tens of thousands of Afghans who helped America's efforts to establish a democracy remain trapped in Afghanistan, at the mercy of the Taliban. They are essentially hostages.

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan led to the immediate collapse of the Afghan government and military and the swift return to power of the Taliban, which calls its government the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. This is the same name the Taliban used for its previous regime, under which al-Qaeda plotted and executed the 9/11 attacks from Afghan soil. The Taliban's alliance with al-Qaeda has not been broken, but in fact has strengthened as it was forged in 20 years of war against the United States and its allies. Afghanistan is again a safe haven for al-Qaeda.

Setting aside the very serious issues of Taliban control of Afghanistan and al-Qaeda's safe haven there, America's abandonment of Afghanistan has had second- and third-order effects on America's allies, adversaries, and enemies. American's adversaries and enemies now sense weakness and are seeking to drive wedges between America and her allies. The desire to end the so-called endless war in Afghanistan has called into question America's commitment to its allies and its leadership on the global stage.

**Al-Qaeda**

More than 20 years after 9/11, al-Qaeda possesses a potent global network. It maintains branches in the Arabian Peninsula, the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia, and its network remains embedded in many other countries. Al-Qaeda continues to maintain effective insurgencies in multiple countries, while using these bases to plot attacks against our homeland and our allies. The Taliban's victory in Afghanistan has been a boon for al-Qaeda. The next generation of al-Qaeda leaders, military commanders, and operatives are taking the field while key elements of the old guard remain to guide them. Despite a concerted manhunt of over 20 years, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who was Osama bin Laden's deputy on September 11, 2001, and took control of al-Qaeda after bin Laden's death in May 2011, remains alive and in control of al-Qaeda's global network.

While much of the attention in the press and in counterterrorism circles remains focused on the Islamic State due to the group's exceptional brutality, al-Qaeda is ultimately the more dangerous

enemy. The Islamic State's demand of absolute fealty to its emir and its organization, along with the group's unwillingness to work with state sponsors of terror, limits its ability to expand. Al-Qaeda's patient approach and willingness to compromise have allowed its top leaders to operate from Iran and facilitated the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan.

In addition to Afghanistan, al-Qaeda maintains safe havens in several countries. Syria's Idlib province hosts both Hurras al-Din, an al-Qaeda branch, and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, a jihadist faction allied with al-Qaeda. The U.S. military occasionally targets al-Qaeda leaders and commanders in Idlib province.

In Yemen, al-Qaeda's local branch, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP, controls rural areas of the country. AQAP has plotted several attacks against the U.S. homeland over the past two decades. Most recently, it claimed credit for a December 6, 2019, shooting at Naval Air Station Pensacola that killed three people.

In Somalia, al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda's branch in East Africa, controls significant portions of southern and central Somalia. The U.S. government withdrew its forces from Somalia in January 2021 and is conducting "over-the-horizon" operations to keep al-Shabaab at bay. Military operations by the United States, Kenya, and the African Union, the latter of which is losing its will to fight in Somalia, are all that is keeping al-Shabaab from controlling all of southern and central Somalia, as it did between 2008 and 2011. In Mali, the French are close to withdrawing their forces, putting the already fragile security situation in central Mali in peril.

These terrorist successes put our homeland at increased risk. With safe havens and the ability to draw on local resources to fund its operations, it is only a matter of time before al-Qaeda and the Islamic State use these advantages to attempt to execute another deadly attack against the U.S. homeland or American interests across the globe.

**The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria**

In Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State, or ISIS, as it is more commonly known, is making a comeback after losing overt control of its last town in Syria in 2019. Insurgent attacks in both countries have increased over the past year as ISIS regenerates its strength. Lest this be dismissed, we have seen this happen before, between early 2012 after the U.S. withdrew from Iraq, and mid-2013, when ISIS, which was then still part of al-Qaeda, stepped up its operations following setbacks during the American "surge" in Iraq. To increase its combat power, the group attacked prisons to free thousands of its fighters. We just witnessed this happen at the al-Sina prison in northeastern Syria. Hundreds of ISIS fighters assaulted the prison, seized nearby neighborhoods, sprung an unknown number of prisoners, and fought the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces for over a week.

Outside of Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State maintains a robust network, particularly in Africa, where it has subsumed elements of al-Qaeda's network, such as in Nigeria, Mozambique, the Sahel, and Sub-Saharan Africa. One year ago, the Islamic State's branch in Mozambique took control of the city of Palma and held it for 10 days. In 2017, the Islamic State battled Filipino security forces for five months for control for the city of Mawari. The Islamic State also has a

presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but it is dwarfed by the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban as well as by al-Qaeda and allied groups. America's focus on the Islamic State's network in Afghanistan as its primary enemy contributed to the Taliban's victory.

**State Sponsors of Terrorism**

Like safe havens, state sponsorship of terrorism is a key factor that allows terror groups to survive and thrive. Iran and Pakistan are the world's two leading state sponsors of terrorism.

Iran's support for Islamist terrorists, both Sunni and Shiite, continues unabated. Iran continues to shelter top al-Qaeda leaders, including the group's deputy emir. Since 2011, the U.S. government has highlighted the "secret deal" that has allowed Iran "to funnel funds and operatives [to al-Qaeda] through its territory." With this deal in effect, al-Qaeda continues to use Iran as a regional hub while being sheltered from U.S. reprisal. The agreement, according to the U.S. Treasury Department, specified that al-Qaeda

> must refrain from conducting any operations within Iranian territory and recruiting operatives inside Iran while keeping Iranian authorities informed of their activities. In return, the Government of Iran gave the Iran-based al-Qa'ida network freedom of operation and uninhibited ability to travel for extremists and their families. Al-Qa'ida members who violate these terms run the risk of being detained by Iranian authorities.

Multiple al-Qaeda leaders who have operated or continue to operate from Iran have been designated as global terrorists. The U.S. State Department, in its 2021 Country Reports on Terrorism, noted that the Iran-al-Qaeda deal remains in effect to this day.

Direct evidence of the Iran-al-Qaeda deal was on full display on August 7, 2020, when Israeli operatives killed Abu Mohammad al-Masri in Tehran. Masri was wanted by the U.S. government for the past three decades for his role in the 1998 Kenya and Tanzania embassy bombings. Masri was not an ordinary al-Qaeda leader: He was the terror group's second in command and likely successor to Ayman al-Zawahiri. While in Tehran, Masri "had been living freely in the Pasdaran district of Tehran, an upscale suburb, since at least 2015," according to *The New York Times*. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps provided him with security.

Iran also played a significant role in the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. In October 2021, I was an expert witness in *Cabrera v. Iran* and detailed how Iran provided safe haven, weapons, financial support, and training to both the Taliban and al-Qaeda. In *Cabrera v. Iran*, the families of American soldiers and civilians who were killed or wounded by the Taliban sued the Iranian government for supporting Taliban and al-Qaeda violence in Afghanistan.

Iran also continues to support a bevy of Shiite militias and terror groups throughout the Middle East. Lebanese Hezbollah, which directly threatens Israel and U.S. interests throughout the Middle East, remains Iran's premier terror proxy. In Iraq, Tehran supports a multitude of militias, including the Hezbollah Brigades and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, which are both listed by the U.S. government as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and are collectively responsible for killing more than 600 U.S. soldiers. One day, these Iraqi militias will likely eclipse Hezbollah. The

Houthis in Yemen control half of the country with the help of the Iranians and are responsible for one of the world's worst humanitarian crises.

Pakistan, which has played a double game with the United States and was complicit in the killing of thousands of American and allied soldiers in Afghanistan, played a key role in the Taliban's takeover of the country. While Iran played a crucial role in aiding the Taliban, Pakistan's use of the Taliban as its proxy was decisive. Pakistan provided the Taliban with safe haven, weapons, financial support, training, and other key forms of aid. Taliban leaders and their families, as well as Taliban military commanders and fighters, lived in Pakistan with the knowledge and support of the Pakistani state. While political reasons have prevented the U.S. government from listing the Pakistani government as a state sponsor of terrorism, Pakistan meets all of the requirements to be listed as such.

Pakistan myopically supports a host of terrorist groups on its own territory as well as in Afghanistan and India to further its goals in the region. Pakistan backs these groups even though they are allied with and aid the very terrorist groups that fight the Pakistani state. In addition, many of the jihadist groups sponsored by Pakistan are allied with al-Qaeda. Groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, Harakat-ul-Mujahideen, and Jaish-e-Mohammed, which wage jihad in Afghanistan and India, continue to receive support from the Pakistani state.

Pakistan's victory in Afghanistan is worrying. The lesson that Pakistan has learned is that supporting terror groups to advance its foreign-policy goals pays well. The United States delivered to Pakistan more than $30 billion in military and economic aid since 9/11 even as Pakistan sponsored our enemies. Pakistan used some of these funds to finance the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan.

**U.S. Efforts to Defeat Terror Groups Have Failed**

After two decades of war, counterterrorism and counterinsurgency actions, sanctions, policing, and legal proceedings, America and her allies have failed to defeat al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other terror groups that threaten us. The threat posed by jihadist groups has expanded, not contracted. Al-Qaeda's geographic footprint across the globe has increased dramatically since 9/11, while its bastard child, the Islamic State, vies for leadership of the global jihad and expands into countries previously untouched by the fighting. Meanwhile, state sponsors of terrorism such as Iran and Pakistan have paid little to no price for their continuing support of jihadist groups.

Regime change, democracy promotion, counterinsurgency, and support of local partners, once hailed as the solution to our problems, have failed spectacularly. The Taliban regained control of Afghanistan less than 20 years after the U.S. invasion. Iraqi security forces collapsed under the weight of the al-Qaeda and Islamic State offensive, which opened the door for Iran to enter the war and regain significant influence in Iraq. In Syria, the United States had so few options that it was forced to back the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization. To hide this fact, the United States relabeled the group the "Syrian Democratic Forces." The Marxist PKK is anything but democratic. The U.S.-backed Somali government is in danger of falling to al-Qaeda's regional branch.

The United States has had limited tactical success in conducting counterterrorism operations. Occasionally, key leaders are killed in airstrikes or limited raids. However, counterterrorism operations are a tactic, not a strategy. As our enemies gain more ground and we pull back, our ability to conduct these operations is diminished, in some cases significantly. The U.S. military and the CIA were able to execute the raid to kill Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan, because they had a presence in Afghanistan. Numerous top al-Qaeda leaders were killed in drone strikes inside Pakistan and in raids in Afghanistan. With the United States no longer in Afghanistan, our ability to target al-Qaeda's leadership has dropped to nearly zero. Al-Qaeda emir Ayman al-Zawahiri is undoubtedly operating in Pakistan or Afghanistan. Other top al-Qaeda leaders also continue to operate from the region.

Perhaps more importantly, the United States has failed on two other fronts: We have failed to understand the nature of our enemies, and we have refused to wage an ideological war against them. Again, Afghanistan is case in point. Carter Malkasian, who served as a key adviser both to General Joseph Dunford when he was chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff and to General Austin Miller when he was commander of Operation Resolute Support and U.S. Forces Afghanistan, penned an article last summer wherein he admitted that he and the U.S. military leadership failed to understand the Taliban harbored deeply held religious motivations that drove its strategy and objectives. It is no wonder the U.S. government was keen to negotiate with the Taliban and trusted it to be an effective counterterrorism partner. And it is no wonder why we lost Afghanistan.

This refusal to acknowledge our enemies' religious motivations has led us to neglect the ideological component of counterterrorism, leaving that playing field almost entirely to our adversaries. The U.S. government and military are fearful of recognizing our enemies' religious motivations, lest they be branded as "Islamophobes." This has allowed al-Qaeda, the Islamic Front, and other terror groups to dominate the narrative and effectively recruit and indoctrinate fighters.

America has the lost will to prosecute the fight. Our leaders are no longer accountable for their failures. This has particularly disturbing repercussions for our military. Not a single general was held to account for the massive tactical and strategic failures that we witnessed last spring and summer in Afghanistan. Our current and next generations of military leaders have learned that failure will not be punished. This is toxic and will have negative implications in future fights, perhaps with more serious and dangerous enemies such as Russia or China.

**A Path Forward**

Without a major attack on the U.S. homeland to refocus our minds, I am highly pessimistic about our ability to correct course in what used to be known as the War on Terror. But if we are to regain our footing, we must, at the minimum, do the following:

- Place facts and objective assessments over desired policy outcomes. Unfortunately, in Washington, the desire to end the so-called endless wars has driven our policy, and the facts about our enemies were modified to achieve desired policy goals.

- Refocus our efforts to analyze and understand our enemies and their objectives, strategy, tactics, and relationships. This analysis must be based on facts, not on preferred narratives.

- Hold leaders in the military and intelligence services accountable. After 9/11, not a single intelligence official resigned or was fired. Instead, they were rewarded. Fast forward 20 years, and U.S. military and intelligence leaders got a pass for the obvious tactical and strategic failures in Afghanistan. This must change if we are to have a chance to succeed.

There are other issues that must be addressed if we are regain the initiative in fighting global jihadists. We must develop a strategy that balances the demands of competition with China and potential conflict with Russia with the need to maintain the persistent fight against our jihadist enemies. We must learn to identify and more productively engage with regional partners in key battlefields in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. The military and intelligence services must be properly resourced to sustain the fight. And the military must re-evaluate and revamp its training programs for foreign forces. Despite billions of dollars spent to stand up the Afghan and Iraqi security forces, they wilted quickly when forced to stand on their own. But these issues are secondary to the three identified previously. If we are to have success, we must first be able to objectively analyze the threat, properly define our enemies, and hold our leaders accountable for their failures.

Our enemies continue to seek to hurt us. As they continue to rack up wins, it is only a matter of time before they muster the strength and capabilities to strike us here in the homeland. Our enemies are committed and resourceful, and they believe we are weak. We must refocus our efforts if we hope to avoid another devastating attack.