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Testimony

TERRORIST THREAT TO THE U.S. HOMELAND – AL-QAEDA IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA (AQAP)

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Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for inviting me here today.

Yemen is facing an unprecedented confluence of crises, the combination of which threatens to overwhelm the beleaguered Yemeni government. The country's problems include international terrorism, violent extremism, religious and tribal conflict, separatism, and transnational smuggling. Attempts to build effective national governance are frustrated by porous borders, a heavily armed population, and a historical absence of much central government control. More than 3 million barrels of oil pass the country's coast every day, through treacherous waters where Islamist terrorists and Somali pirates have staged several successful maritime attacks, threatening to disrupt international commerce and the flow of vital hydrocarbons. These challenges not only endanger Yemen's stability and regional security, but they also threaten American domestic security.

Interrelated economic, demographic, and domestic security challenges are converging to threaten the stability of Yemen. At the heart of the country's problems is a looming economic crisis. Yemen's oil reserves are fast running out, with few viable options for a sustainable post-oil economy. Yemen is the poorest country in the Arab world, with most people surviving on less than one dollar per day. Its population growth rate, which exceeds 3 percent per year, is among the world's highest. The government has been unable to provide adequate educational or other public services for the rapidly expanding population, more than two-thirds of which is under the age of 24, and illiteracy stands at over 50 percent (and close to 70 percent for women). The faltering economy and poorly prepared workforce have pushed unemployment to almost 40 percent. The country's dire economic circumstances will soon limit the government's ability to deliver the funds needed to hold the country together. The population is expected to double to 40 million over the next two decades, by which time Yemen will no longer be an oil producer, and its water resources will be severely diminished. This is currently the greatest source of violence in the country; an estimated 80 percent of violence in Yemen is about access to water. A rapidly expanding and increasingly poorer population places unbearable pressure on the government's ability to provide basic services. Domestic security is endangered by Islamist terrorism, magnified by a resurgent al-Qaeda organization, an armed insurrection in the North, and an increasingly active secessionist movement in the South.

The recent wave of unrest rocking the Middle East has not spared Yemen. Popular protests in Sana'a, Taiz, Aden, and other cities against the government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh have been ongoing since January. This latest challenge has mobilized a segment of the population that has thus far not presented much challenge to the Yemeni government. In an attempt to short-circuit the protest movement, the government announced a series of economic concessions. It sought to maintain the allegiance of the military and security forces by announcing pay raises and even access to free food and gas. It addressed the concerns of civil servants by putting into immediate effect salary increases for the lowest paid employees originally scheduled for October 2011. It cut the national income tax by half and reportedly increased some subsidies and introduced new price controls. The government also waived university tuition fees for currently enrolled students and announced a scheme to help new university graduates find employment. Finally, it extended social welfare assistance to an additional half-million families.

When economic measures failed to quell the discontent, President Saleh turned to political concessions. In a speech to the parliament and shura council on February 2, he announced that he would not stand for re-election in 2013 and that his eldest son and presumed heir, General Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, commander of the Republican Guard, would also not run for president. He “froze” the implementation of a controversial constitutional amendment eliminating term limits on the presidency. Saleh also stated that regional governors would now be directly elected rather than indirectly elected by local councils, a little noticed but important change. And finally, he called for the formation of a national unity government and the re-launching of the stalled national dialogue process, and postponed parliamentary elections scheduled for this April to allow time to properly prepare.

Although the regime nominally met almost all of its demands, the opposition promptly rejected the concessions, not trusting the president to keep his promises. Saleh has previously pledged not to seek re-election, but has gone back on his word numerous times in the past.

Yemen’s challenges are compounded by corruption, severe governance deficiencies, and an absence of central government control in much of the country, as well as by the pending transition in political leadership. While Saleh announced last month that he would not stand for re-election, he has no obvious successor. The post-Saleh government will be severely strained by a combination of reduced revenue, diminished state capacity, and three ongoing conflicts including the seven year old civil war in the North against the Houthis rebels, an increasingly violent secessionist movement in the South, and a resurgent al-Qaeda organization.

The deteriorating security situation in Yemen is not purely an international issue. Greater instability in Yemen is a domestic American security issue, as evidenced by the emergence of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

Since its creation in January 2009, the Yemen-based al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has eclipsed ‘core al-Qaeda’ as the primary terrorist threat to U.S. national security. Since last year I have asserted that AQAP has emerged as the organization most likely to kill American nationals and to attack U.S. interests. In an address at the Carnegie Endowment last December, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism John Brennan termed AQAP “the most operationally active node of the al-Qaida network.” In testimony last month, National Counterterrorism Center Director Michael Leiter referred to AQAP as the most significant risk to the U.S. homeland.

AQAP has rapidly evolved into an increasingly lethal and agile organization, with a proven track record of mounting operations within Yemen, regionally, and internationally. AQAP thrives on Yemen’s internal disarray. The government’s inability to control territory provides the space al-Qaeda craves, using poverty and legitimate grievances against a repressive domestic regime to win support.

AQAP learned the lessons of the failed al-Qaeda campaign in Saudi Arabia. It avoids targeting Yemeni civilians, has a highly sophisticated media apparatus, and is cautious not to

repeat the same mistakes made in the kingdom. More worrisome, when initial operations have been unsuccessful, AQAP has re-attacked the same target, such as the U.S. Embassy in Sana'a (attacked twice in 2009), Saudi Prince Muhammad bin Nayef (who has survived four reported assassination attempts by AQAP), and British diplomatic targets in Sana'a (attacked twice in 2010). This should serve as a very dire warning when we consider AQAP's two attempted attacks so far against U.S. aviation targets.

The organization has a very fast learning curve, quickly adjusts and improvises, and is very adept at exploiting opportunities. AQAP has been clear in stating its planned objectives, and it has repeatedly delivered on its threats. These concerns are heightened by the presence of Yemeni-American cleric Anwar al-Awlaqi in Yemen and his alleged role in inciting English-speaking foreigners to engage in violence and militancy. Moreover, many of the recent alleged terrorist plots and plans in the United States appear to be linked to Yemen, AQAP, and Awlaqi.

The attempted bombing of Northwest Flight 235 over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009 marked the first time since the September 11th attacks that al-Qaeda had successfully engaged a domestic American target. This attack was further noteworthy because the plot did not originate in South Asia with the al-Qaeda Senior Leadership—it came from Yemen. The Christmas Day attack was followed some ten months later when AQAP again targeted U.S. aviation assets with the attempted delivery of explosives concealed as cargo packages mailed from Yemen. The worst case scenario was narrowly avoided in both these cases, but not by successful proactive counter-terrorism efforts. We cannot count on our luck continuing.

The 2009 Christmas Day attack demonstrated an early desire to attack on American soil. The October 2010 parcel bomb plot is just the latest evidence that AQAP is now the greatest single terrorist threat to the security of the U.S.—a greater danger even than al-Qaeda's central leadership.

AQAP's growing ambitions and reach have also seen more successful operations in Yemen itself. In 2010 there were more than 50 AQAP attacks in Yemen. In the first two months of 2011 there have been over 10 attacks. AQAP has targeted energy infrastructure, foreigners, and domestic security forces. It has also successfully cast U.S. air strikes and military support—including cruise missile strikes in December 2009—as examples of American aggression.

We should be clear that there is much that we do not know about AQAP. While we may want to view AQAP as a formal organization with an established hierarchy, other analysts have also noted that it is doubtful that killing or capturing the group's top leaders will eliminate Yemen's al-Qaeda problem. It would likely degrade AQAP's ability to mount operations; however, the grievances that fuel militancy in Yemen would also likely remain.

I would suggest that there are likely several trends within AQAP. First, the Yemenis active in the organization seem to be focused primarily on a local agenda. Second, the Saudis active in the group are generally less focused on local Yemeni politics and more intent upon returning to the kingdom to strike at the Saudi government. The third trend is that foreign nationals—as well as some Yemenis and Saudis—are focusing primarily on international and Western targets. I would place within this last grouping the Westerners active with AQAP—including

Americans—as well as Anwar al-Awlaqi. These distinctions are not hard and fast, and there is very likely movement and overlap between them.

Media Usage

The group is very skilled at amplifying its message, as seen by the debut of the AQAP-affiliated English-language magazine *Inspire* calling for attacks on the U.S. Its powers of communication, along with growing military successes, have begun to attract increasing numbers of foreign terrorists into Yemen. The organization has developed a very sophisticated media operation, in both Arabic and English. Through the English-language magazine *Inspire*, now in its fourth issue, the organization is able to reach a much broader audience. In addition, just about the time that *Inspire* was first released in July 2010, a new YouTube channel appeared featuring many of AQAP's videos subtitled into English. While the channel is no longer available, the material remains online, reposted by other users. Both of these developments demonstrate how AQAP has dramatically increased the size of its potential audience. No longer does one need Arabic or particular know-how to navigate jihadi web forums. Non-Arabic speakers can now access this material using Google and YouTube.

Yemen's Changing Role

Over the years, Yemen had been a place to train and prepare for jihad or to rest between campaigns. It is now being transformed into an actual theater of jihad. As other observers have noted, Yemen is being portrayed by AQAP as a place where it is legitimate to engage in jihad. In this portrayal, aspiring militants can resist American aggression and fight an illegitimate government in Yemen. AQAP has gone on to further recast Yemen as a “source of inspiration” for potential extremists located overseas. The organization has noted in *Inspire* that volunteers can do greater damage at home, without needing to travel abroad.

In conclusion, AQAP has quickly eclipsed core al-Qaeda as the most immediate terrorist threat to U.S. persons and interests. While the al-Qaeda Senior Leadership may still have the ambition to launch spectacular attacks against the United States, AQAP has emerged as the more imminent threat. This is exacerbated by the concern that AQAP has had success in recruiting Westerners, including converts, who do not fit traditional terrorist profiles. It will be more difficult to identify and disrupt plots led by these individuals. Very clearly Yemen's problems are not staying in Yemen and AQAP poses a grave and growing threat to American domestic security.