

Testimony on “Examining the Threat from ISIS and al Qaeda”

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Michael Morell

Private Citizen

Former Acting Director and Deputy Director of the CIA

Chairman Rose, Ranking Member Walker, and Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for the opportunity to talk with you today about the threats that our nation still faces from al Qaeda and ISIS.

I want to emphasize the word “still” because I fear that we are losing our focus on terrorism – in large part because most Americans think al Qaeda and ISIS have been defeated and that a significant attack on the Homeland is no longer possible. I believe those perceptions are wrong.

I spent 33 years at the Central Intelligence Agency. I spent the first 15 years covering East Asian issues. The last 18 years, in assignments of increasing responsibility, I covered the entire world – but my focus was on counterterrorism.

As DCI George Tenet’s executive assistant, I was the first person called by CIA’s Operations Center when al Qaeda attacked our embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998; as President George W. Bush’s daily intelligence briefer, I was with him on 9/11 itself; as the senior focal point for liaison with the British analytic community, I was in London for Britain’s 9/11, the subway and bus attacks there in July 2005; I was part of the CIA leadership team when we, the British, and Pakistanis foiled in August 2006 an al Qaida plot to blow up 10-15 airliners over the Atlantic Ocean, and as CIA’s deputy director, I was with President Obama when bin Ladin was brought to justice in May 2011.

I lived and breathed counterterrorism. It is what defined my career, even in the four years before 9/11.

My 18 years focused on CT taught me, what I believe, are four critical lessons about terrorism and counterterrorism. Allow me to share them with you.

--Terrorism is a symptom; it is not the disease. And, until the disease is addressed, we will be dealing with the symptoms. And because I have significant doubts that the disease will be dealt with, I believe that my children’s generation and my grandchildren’s generation are still going to be fighting this fight. At the end of the day, you can’t only capture and kill your way out of this.

--Terrorist groups are easy to degrade, but they are also easily rebuilt. And, whether they are in degradation mode or in rebuilding mode depends on many factors – but the most important is the degree of counterterrorism pressure on the group. The policy implication of this lesson is, I think, obvious.

--It is difficult to overstate the importance of a physical safe haven to a terrorist group – a place in which they feel relatively safe and secure and from which they can strategize, train, plot, and launch attacks. It is therefore critical that terrorist groups be denied a sanctuary. When we don't do that, the threat to the Homeland increases significantly.

--The smartest of terrorists are creative and innovative. Examples abound and include Khalid Sheikh Muhammad who conceived of using aircraft as guided missiles; ISIS operatives who built a Hollywood-quality and Madison Avenue-quality, online propaganda effort that resulted in ISIS-inspired attacks in the U.S; and, most recently, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula finding a way around the border and immigration defenses we put in place after 9/11, a success on their part that resulted in the recent attack in Pensacola, the first directed foreign terrorist attack on the Homeland since 9/11. We need to be equally imaginative in defending ourselves.

When I put these lessons together, I come to the conclusion that we need to stay focused on foreign terrorist groups; we need to continue to collect the best intelligence on their plans, intentions, and capabilities; and we need, working with our allies and partners, to continue to keep pressure on them and continue to degrade them. And, we need to be part of, to the best we can, an international effort to deal with the disease, not just the symptoms.

In looking around the world, I have many specific concerns – ranging from South East Asia to South Asia and from the Middle East to Africa. Let conclude my opening statement by pointing out two issues of particular concern.

--ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Despite our destruction of the ISIS caliphate, which was critically important, I believe ISIS in the Middle East is on the rebound, that it is reconstituting. ISIS attacks in Iraq are on the rise, including a significant one just a few weeks ago in Samarra, just an hour's drive north from Baghdad. Even more worrisome, German authorities recently arrested four Turkmen sent by ISIS to conduct an attack on a US military facility in Germany. The four had already acquired weapons and were in the process of acquiring explosives when they were arrested. This suggests ISIS is rebuilding its capability to attack Europe – a capability that resulted in both the 2015 ISIS attack in Paris that killed 130 and wounded 413 and the 2016 attack in Brussels that killed 32, wounding over 300.

--Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. The Taliban today is militarily and politically stronger than at any time since 9/11. I believe that the Taliban, in its peace negotiations with the United States, have told us what we want to hear in order to encourage us to leave the country. I believe that the Taliban's intention, which is achievable, is to overthrow the current Afghan government and reestablish a dictatorship based on Sharia Law. I also believe that the Taliban will provide safe haven to al Qaeda and that it will not do what is necessary to prevent the group from again

becoming a significant threat to the United States. The ties between the two groups are close. One of the most important is al Qaeda's extremely tight relationship with the Taliban's Haqqani Group. Siraj Haqqani, head of the group, is one of the deputy leaders of the Taliban.

To sum up, I believe that we need to stay on the CT Watch or we will be hit again.

Chairman, that concludes my opening remarks. I look forward to your questions.