

# Congressional Testimony

## **The Arab Spring and Al-Qaeda's Resurgence**

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Chairman McKeon, Ranking Member Smith, distinguished members of the committee, it is an honor to appear before you to discuss the state of al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and associated groups. My testimony will focus on how the Arab Spring environment presented new opportunities for al-Qaeda, altered its focus in discernible ways, and allowed it to experience significant geographic expansion.

Not only is the expansion of al-Qaeda's recognized affiliates clear, but also a large number of new organizations have cropped up in the Middle East and North Africa that profess an allegiance to al-Qaeda's ideology, salafi jihadism, yet claim they are organizationally independent from its network. These claims cannot necessarily be taken at face value. Indeed, two central questions that analysts of jihadist militancy debate today are: 1) to what extent are these new jihadist groups connected to the al-Qaeda network, and 2) to what extent is al-Qaeda's senior leadership (AQSL) able to set priorities and strategy for its affiliates, and thus either control or influence their activities? Uncertainties surrounding both questions somewhat complicate the U.S.'s policy response.

This testimony begins by examining the question of what al-Qaeda is, and what its goals are. Thereafter, it turns to the perceptions that al-Qaeda and other salafi jihadists had of the Arab Spring, and their ideas about how the movement could benefit. The testimony then calls into question the notion that al-Qaeda's senior leadership has been decimated—which, if true, means that intentions aside, the group would be unable to execute strategy in the new environment. I then turn to factors that did in fact strengthen al-Qaeda and jihadism during the Arab Spring, before giving an overview of al-Qaeda's current position. I conclude by discussing what kinds of policy responses are appropriate for the United States to adopt to address this challenge.

## **What is al-Qaeda?**

For the purposes of this testimony, I adopt a definition of “al-Qaeda” that would be considered valid by most analysts of the group: the core leadership and recognized affiliates. However, I also believe that the growth of salafi jihadism in places like Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt has an impact on al-Qaeda's network and capabilities, so my testimony discusses these places as well.

*Two models for understanding al-Qaeda.* It's worth understanding that there are currently two competing models for understanding al-Qaeda that speak to some of the uncertainties that analysts confront. One model can be called the minimalist view, under which al-Qaeda is relatively small. This conception holds that al-Qaeda should be understood, at most, as the group's senior leadership and recognized affiliates who have had an oath of allegiance to that leadership publicly accepted. An example of this dynamic is when Somali militant group al-Shabaab became part of al-Qaeda in February 2012: it was personally announced by al-Qaeda emir Ayman al-Zawahiri. However, the minimalist view often argues that al-Qaeda's recognized affiliates are in reality only tenuously connected to AQSL because the leadership lacks mechanisms to exercise command and control, and affiliates have become increasingly independent and local in their outlook. Indeed, many proponents of the minimalist view hold that groups that

have taken up al-Qaeda's mantle but aren't engaged in active plots against the United States cannot really be considered al-Qaeda.

There is also a competing view, which we can call the expansive view, in which AQSL plays a more powerful role within the network, and al-Qaeda may be broader than just the recognized affiliates because the group may have taken on unacknowledged affiliates during the Arab Spring. Proponents of this view can point to the large cache of documents captured from Osama bin Laden's Pakistan hideout, which establishes that the jihadist leader wanted to rebrand the organization prior to his death. Under the expansive view, the various Ansar al-Sharia groups that suddenly sprung up in the Arab Spring environment may in fact be part of al-Qaeda.

The notion that these groups might be al-Qaeda is illustrated by Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST). A year or two ago, most observers would have considered AST to be a purely local organization. To be sure, there were reasons to suspect from the time of AST's birth that it might be more than just local. Its leader, Abu Iyadh al-Tunisi, had longstanding jihadist credentials as well as specific connections to al-Qaeda. Among other things, while living in Taliban-run Afghanistan in 2000, Abu Iyadh founded the Tunisian Combatant Group (TCG), which facilitated the assassination of Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud in Afghanistan just before al-Qaeda executed the 9/11 attacks.<sup>1</sup> The following year, the United Nations designated TCG an al-Qaeda associated organization. Further, AST members Sami bin Khamis Essid and Mehdi Kammoun had been an important part of al-Qaeda's network in Italy.<sup>2</sup>

Over time, growing evidence suggested connections between AST and al-Qaeda's North African affiliate, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Tunisian authorities alleged in December 2012 that the Uqba ibn Nafi Brigade, a militant group operating between Algeria and Tunisia that engaged in frequent combat with Tunisian authorities at the border, linked AQIM to AST operationally.<sup>3</sup>

The following year, after AST allegedly assassinated two secular politicians, the Tunisian government officially designated the group a terrorist organization and banned it. Tunisia also released new information connecting AST to AQIM and the al-Qaeda network more generally. This included allegations that AST emir Abu Iyadh al-Tunisi and AQIM leader Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud had signed a handwritten "Allegiance Act," and that Abu Iyadh had made "an oath of allegiance to an Algerian emir" (likely Abdel Wadoud).<sup>4</sup> Tunisian sources further claimed that AST's funding came from al-Qaeda financiers.<sup>5</sup> When the U.S. State Department designated AST on January 10, 2014, it

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron Zelin, "Missionary at Home, Jihadist Abroad: A Profile of Tunisia's Abu Ayyad the Emir of Ansar al-Sharia," *Militant Leadership Monitor* 3:4 (April 2012), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Aaron Zelin, "Who's Who in Tunisia's Salafi-Jihadi Community: A Look at Key Leaders in Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia," *Militant Leadership Monitor* 4:4 (April 2013), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Mourad Sellami, "Cellule d'Al Qaïda démantelée aux frontières: Les précisions du ministre de l'intérieur tunisien," *El Watan*, December 22, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> See description of Tunisia's evidence in Daveed Gartenstein-Ross & Bridget Moreng, "Tunisia's War with Ansar al-Sharia: New Revelations About Al-Qaeda's North African Network," *War on the Rocks*, Oct. 21, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> "Al-Qaeda Funds Ansar al-Sharia, Tunisia Reveals," *All Africa*, August 29, 2013.

described the group as “ideologically aligned with al-Qaeda and tied to its affiliates, including AQIM.”<sup>6</sup>

This progression of evidence demonstrates a great deal. AST was initially understood as local despite its leader’s international connections. Over time, evidence began to suggest some operational connection to AQIM. The precise contours of this relationship were vague at first, but grew increasingly concrete as more allegations were made public. At this point, both Tunisia and the U.S. have made clear that their intelligence suggests initial descriptions of AST as purely local were inaccurate. Indeed, if Tunisia’s claims are accurate—including Abu Iyadh taking a formal oath of allegiance to AQIM’s emir, and AST receiving funding from al-Qaeda—then rather than just being *tied* to al-Qaeda, AST may *be* al-Qaeda.

*Al-Qaeda’s goals.* Contrary to some views of it, al-Qaeda is a strategic actor. There are a variety of reasons it decided to go to war against the United States, but prominent among them was its belief that doing so could help the group to achieve its regional objectives. As Thomas Joscelyn notes, “Al-Qaeda’s jihadists are not just terrorists; they are political revolutionaries.”<sup>7</sup> Atop their revolutionary agenda is the desire to control territory, and to implement their hard-line version of *sharia* where they do.

This goal of controlling territory and imposing religious law helps to illuminate the reasons for a division within the jihadist movement concerning whether it should focus its militant efforts on the “near enemy”—toppling the corrupt Arab regimes, which jihadists often refer to as apostate governments—or instead target the “far enemy,” the United States and other Western powers.<sup>8</sup> While al-Qaeda viewed both the United States and the apostate Arab regimes as its enemies before the 9/11 attacks, it decided to focus its militant efforts against the U.S. and other Western countries.

A study released in the summer of 2009 by a jihadist “think tank” sheds some light on what kind of considerations went into this decision. The study explained that in waging war on Saudi Arabia, al-Qaeda faced the decision of fighting Saudi Arabia directly or striking at the U.S. presence in that country. If it fought Saudi Arabia, al-Qaeda’s attacks would have encountered not only a ferocious counterterrorism response, but also condemnation from the Saudi *ulema* (religious scholars). In that case, al-Qaeda’s war against the Saudis would have been a losing effort, “given the size and weight of the religious institution, and the legitimacy and prestige it instilled in the people’s minds across more than 70 years.”<sup>9</sup> But the study viewed striking at the Americans as a wise choice, because the kingdom would be forced to defend their presence, “which will cost them their legitimacy in the eyes of Muslims.” Moreover, the

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<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, “Terrorist Designations of Three Ansar al-Sharia Organizations and Leaders,” January 10, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, “Know Your Enemy,” *Weekly Standard*, January 20, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> See Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Historical Studies and Strategic Recommendations Division, “Strategic Study on Global Conflict and the Status of the Jihadist Trend,” July 4, 2009.

*ulema* would be delegitimized too if they defended the U.S. presence.

This study provides some indication of the strategy involved in targeting the United States on 9/11 and thereafter: when the U.S. was the target, that didn't mean that fighting America was in fact the group's overarching goal. Instead, al-Qaeda was keenly aware that fighting America could simultaneously undermine regimes in the region and deter the U.S. from coming to their aid. Indeed, before 9/11 al-Qaeda's senior leadership believed they could cause the U.S. government to withdraw its support for various Muslim rulers and Israel, as they believed American support was the main reason why early jihadist efforts to overthrow Muslim dictatorships ended in bloody fiascos.

As the next section discusses further, the Arab Spring has changed al-Qaeda's strategic calculus because the revolutions revealed the fundamental weakness of the region's regimes. This allows al-Qaeda to focus more on the region, as it believes that it can now attain its goals there without first concentrating militant efforts on the United States. Contrary to the claims of some analysts, when jihadist groups are regionally focused that doesn't mean that the groups are therefore not part of al-Qaeda. As Joscelyn wrote of arguments concerning locally focused groups not being "true" al-Qaeda, "Such arguments miss the entire reason for al-Qaeda's existence, which has always been to acquire power in 'local' settings. This is why al-Qaeda has always devoted most of its resources to fueling insurgencies."<sup>10</sup>

### **The Arab Uprisings and Salafi Jihadist Strategy**

As the Arab Uprisings intensified, major salafi jihadist strategists quickly reached a rough consensus about what the developments meant. They agreed that the political upheavals were good for the movement for a variety of reasons. These strategists thought that several dynamics would weaken their foes while strengthening the jihadists' hand.

Jihadist observers believed that the uprisings demonstrated the limits of U.S. and Western power. Jihadists believed "global infidelity" would have intervened, for example, to prop up Tunisia's Ben Ali regime had Western countries not realized that the government was doomed regardless of what actions they took.<sup>11</sup> They had similar perceptions of Hosni Mubarak's fall in Egypt. Describing the United States as "confused and astonished," Abu Yahya al-Libi explained that America "did not know what to do as they lost this most loyal puppet which was losing its own grip on power. His reign deteriorated day after day until it crumbled before the defiance of the people."<sup>12</sup>

Referring to a weakening United States, Zawahiri said that the "tyrants" it supported were seeing their thrones crumble at the same time "their master," the U.S., was being defeated. He pointed to the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. "defeats" in Iraq and Afghanistan, and still more defeats during the Arab Spring uprisings: "It was then

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<sup>10</sup> Joscelyn, "Know Your Enemy."

<sup>11</sup> See forum member Imarat al-Jihad, "Tunisian Incidents: Did Infidelity Shed Its Skin and Have a Conscience Awakening?," Ansar al-Mujahedin Network, January 17, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Abu Yahya al-Libi, "To Our People in Libya," posted on Shumukh al-Islam Network, March 12, 2011.

defeated in Tunisia, losing its agent there. Then it was defeated in Egypt, losing its greatest agents there.” Even in Libya, where NATO intervened to topple Muammar Qaddafi’s regime, Zawahiri framed the West as being defeated: in Qaddafi it lost an “agent” who “participated in a war against Islam in the name of fighting terror, who handed all of the nuclear material and reactors to them.”<sup>13</sup>

In other words, jihadists thought the U.S. was no longer able to simply intervene to protect its own client states, thus showing why an increased regional focus stemmed naturally from al-Qaeda’s understanding of events. This jihadist perception altered the movement’s strategies, allowing al-Qaeda and its allies to focus their efforts on the region in specific ways.

Al-Qaeda’s strategic adaptations were intimately related to two specific advantages that its leading thinkers discerned in the new environment. The first was prisoner releases. A lengthy hagiographical account of how “the mujahedin” had escaped from the Abu Za’bal prison appeared on the Ansar al Mujahedin Network, a jihadist web forum, soon after the Egyptian uprising began. Thereafter, jihadist thinker Hani al-Siba’i published multiple lists of violent Islamists who were released from Egyptian prisons.<sup>14</sup> The second perceived operational advantage was that the fall of established regimes would lead to an era of greater openness that would create unprecedented opportunities to undertake *dawa*.<sup>15</sup> As one Malaysian academic has noted, *dawa* “refers to calling or inviting people to embrace Islam. Though not an article of the Islamic faith, Muslims are urged to be actively engaged in *dawa* activities.”<sup>16</sup> Most frequently, salafi jihadists’ *dawa* efforts are focused not on leading non-Muslims to Islam, but on persuading other Muslims to accept their particular version of the faith. This focus on other Muslims can be seen, for example, in the statement of Abu al-Mundhir al-Shinqiti, an influential jihadist sheikh believed to be of Mauritanian origin, who warned of the need to “concentrate on the aspect of preaching” in Tunisia due to the ignorance about religion that Ben Ali’s regime had inflicted upon the population.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, the salafi jihadist movement has never been satisfied in constraining

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<sup>13</sup> Ayman al-Zawahiri, “And the Americans’ Defeats Continue,” posted on Global Jihad Network, October 12, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> See Hani al-Siba’i, “The Release of Prisoners After Nearly Twenty Years of Injustice,” Ansar Dawlat al-Iraq al-Islamiyah, February 23, 2011; Hani al-Siba’i, “The Release of a New Batch After Long Years Behind Bars,” Al-Jahafal, February 27, 2011; Hani al-Siba’i, “Urgent: The Release of a New Batch of Those Charged with Military Verdicts,” Ansar Dawlat al-Iraq al-Islamiyah, March 4, 2011; Al-Maqrizi Center for Historical Studies, “Names of the Released Detainees from the al-Aqrab, al-Istiqbal, al-Wadi, and Burj al-Arab Prisons,” Shumukh al-Islam Network, March 18, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> See Ayman al-Zawahiri, “And be Neither Weakened nor Saddened,” Al-Sahab Media, August 15, 2011; Hamzah bin Muhammad al-Bassam, “Heeding the Advantages and Lessons of the Two Uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia,” Ansar Dawlat al-Iraq al-Islamiyah, February 25, 2011; Hamid bin Abdallah al-Ali, “The Joy Lies in the Harvest of the Two Revolutions,” posted on al-Ali’s official website, February 15, 2011; Atiyatallah Abd al-Rahman, “The People’s Revolt... The Fall of Corrupt Arab Regimes... The Demolition of the Idol of Stability... and the New Beginning,” distributed by the Global Islamic Media Front, February 16, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Munawar Haque, review of Sohirin M. Solihin, *Islamic Dawah: Theory and Practice* (Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press, 2008), published in *Intellectual Discourse* 17:1 (2009), p. 119.

<sup>17</sup> Abu al-Mundhir al-Shinqiti, “Answers to Questions from Our Tunisian Brothers,” *Minbar al-Tawhid wal-Jihad*, December 15, 2011.

itself to nonviolent *dawa*. Its strategists thus presented a staged plan which one can discern from the early theoretical work. Even while the movement was undertaking *dawa* peacefully, in ways it could not under the old regimes, strategists encouraged the movement to prepare to later engage in violence.<sup>18</sup>

### **The State of Al-Qaeda's Senior Leadership**

Conventional wisdom holds that al-Qaeda's senior leadership has been decimated by Osama bin Laden's death and the drone campaign that the U.S. has been waging. If this is the case, then regardless of the opportunities it perceives from the Arab Spring, perhaps al-Qaeda is unable to execute any of its strategic ideas. However, I would question this conventional wisdom for two reasons. First, the available evidence suggests that leadership attrition does not degrade groups like al-Qaeda to the extent that is often believed. Second, there is specific evidence that AQSL retains capabilities despite this attrition.

Relevant to the question of what impact attrition has had on AQSL is an important monograph published by Lt. Col. Derek Jones entitled *Understanding the Form, Function, and Logic of Clandestine Insurgent and Terrorist Networks*.<sup>19</sup> Jones notes that, historically, the overt and visible parts of a guerrilla group aren't the most important components. Instead, look to the clandestine underground. It is a well-worn adage that, by slowly eroding the opponent's will, a guerrilla network "wins by not losing." Of course, a network doesn't require mere survival in order to win, but must also maintain the ability to mount attacks.

Unfortunately, al-Qaeda long ago understood how to lessen its organizational signature. Jones argues that al-Qaeda and similar groups are clandestine cellular networks: clandestine in that they are designed to be out of sight and cellular in that they are compartmentalized to minimize damage when the enemy neutralizes some portion of the network. Compartmentalization takes two forms. First, at a cell level, a minimum of personal information is known about other cell members. Second, there is strategic compartmentalization between different elements within the organization. Counterinsurgents can capture one person in a cell without destroying the cell; and where cell members must interact directly, structural compartmentalization attempts to ensure that the cell cannot be exploited to target other cells or leaders.

Jones writes that counterinsurgents routinely mistake the more overt parts of an insurgency—which can be easily replaced—for the clandestine cells that generate them. But some of the seemingly spontaneously generating cells may say less about the supposedly decentralized nature of a network than it does about the clandestine leadership's ability to hold itself out of view and recover from seemingly fatal reverses.

The most troubling implication of Jones's study is that al-Qaeda may be well positioned to recover from the losses that so many analysts believe have devastated it.

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<sup>18</sup> Al-Bassam, "Heeding the Advantages and Lessons of the Two Uprisings."

<sup>19</sup> Derek Jones, *Understanding the Form, Function, and Logic of Clandestine Insurgent and Terrorist Networks* (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: Joint Special Operations University, 2012).

As Jones argues, the form, function, and logic of this organization are designed to maximize its chances of survival, and thus “the removal of single individuals, regardless of function, is well within the tolerance of this type of organizational structure and thus has little long-term effect.”<sup>20</sup> Though this point may be overstated as applied to very effective figures like bin Laden or Anwar al-Awlaki, the powerful point remains that the logic of organizations like al-Qaeda is such that their ability to recover from leadership and other losses is maximized.

Much like today, conventional wisdom a decade ago held that al-Qaeda’s core leadership had been decimated. A 2004 *Los Angeles Times* article outlines the perceptions counterterrorism experts held at the time: “Osama bin Laden may now serve more as an inspirational figure than a CEO,” and “the al-Qaeda movement now appears to be more of an ideology than an organization.”<sup>21</sup> This conventional wisdom proved to be inaccurate; and indeed, prevailing views of al-Qaeda have tended to underestimate its resilience. As Bruce Hoffman recently noted in an academic article documenting widely shared perceptions of al-Qaeda dating back to 2003, “Al-Qaeda Core has stubbornly survived despite predictions or conventional wisdom to the contrary.”<sup>22</sup> Other academic work examining the drone campaign also undermines the notion that this attrition-based strategy is likely to cripple the jihadist group.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to the possibility that analysts are overestimating the impact of attrition, there are specific reasons to believe al-Qaeda remains a viable network. At the time of bin Laden’s death, al-Qaeda was anything but a shattered organization: documents captured from his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan indicated that bin Laden “was a lot more involved in directing al-Qaeda personnel and operations than sometimes thought over the last decade,” and that he had been providing strategic guidance to al-Qaeda affiliates in Yemen and Somalia.<sup>24</sup> Press reporting identified a dispersed leadership with named individuals in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, and East Africa. There have been no reports that the vast majority of leaders identified in the wake of bin Laden’s death were killed or that their authority has diminished.

Information that has come out over the past few years further indicates that the network remains functional. For example, the Egyptian press has published correspondence from the Jamal Network, which is based in both Egypt and Libya, showing that Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) served as a conduit between its leader, Muhammad Jamal, and Zawahiri. Other documents show that Muhammad Jamal sent an individual to Mali to serve as his representative there during the country’s period of jihadist rule in the north, thus confirming the overlap between various jihadist groups. Indeed, press reports indicating that AQIM, AST, Ansar al-Sharia in Libya, Boko Haram, and the Malian jihadist groups MUJAO and Ansar al-Din have worked together

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Douglas Frantz et al., “Al-Qaeda Seen as Wider Threat,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 26, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Bruce Hoffman, “Al-Qaeda’s Uncertain Future,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 36:8 (2013), p. 636.

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Aaron Mannes, “Testing the Snake Head Strategy: Does Killing or Capturing Its Leaders Reduce a Terrorist Group’s Activity?,” *Journal of International Policy Solutions*, Spring 2008, pp. 40-49; Megan Smith and James Igoe Walsh, “Do Drone Strikes Degrade al-Qaeda? Evidence from Propaganda Output,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 25 (2013), pp. 311-27.

<sup>24</sup> Lolita C. Baldor et al., “Source: Bin Laden Directing al-Qaeda Figures,” Associated Press, May 6, 2011.

operationally in Africa. And August press reporting of what was colloquially dubbed an al-Qaeda “conference call” between more than twenty of the network’s far-flung operatives indicates continuing communications capabilities.<sup>25</sup>

AQSL’s expansion into Yemen provides further reason to believe that the senior leadership is growing even more connected. Nasser al-Wuhayshi of AQAP was promoted in 2013 to al-Qaeda’s general manager. This indicates a geographic broadening of the core leadership: there is no reason that AQSL can only exist in South Asia, and the general manager position should be considered part of the group’s core. AQSL’s expansion into Yemen means that they now operate from a more central geographic location from which it will be easier to manage operations in Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere.

### **Factors Strengthening al-Qaeda and Jihadism**

Three primary factors have strengthened al-Qaeda and jihadism in the Arab Spring environment, two of which fundamentally relate to the jihadist strategy previously outlined: prisoner releases, *dawa* opportunities, and the resurgence of jihadist-aligned charity networks.

*Prisoner releases.* The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence report on the notorious September 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi notes that a number of individuals affiliated with terrorist groups were involved, including those affiliated with the Muhammad Jamal Network.<sup>26</sup> Jamal himself is notable as one of many jihadist figures to have been released from Egyptian prison.<sup>27</sup> This makes Jamal part of the aforementioned trend that began with the Arab Spring uprisings, in which prisons in affected countries have been emptied. In many cases, it is a good thing that prisoners have gone free: the Arab dictatorships were notorious for unjustly incarcerating and abusing their political prisoners. But jihadists were part of this wave of releases.

Prisoners went free for a variety of reasons. In Libya, Qaddafi’s government initially used releases as an offensive tactic early after the uprisings, setting prisoners free in rebellious areas in order to create strife.<sup>28</sup> As the rebellion continued, some prison governors decided to empty prisons they were charged with guarding, including as a means of defection.<sup>29</sup> Chaos also allowed prison escapes, and gunmen attacked prisons in order to free inmates. Regimes that experienced less chaotic transitions, including Tunisia and Egypt, were hesitant to continue imprisoning virtually anybody jailed by the old regime, including violent Islamists with blood on their hands.

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<sup>25</sup> Eli Lake and Josh Rogin, “U.S. Intercepted al-Qaeda’s ‘Legion of Doom’ Conference Call,” *Daily Beast*, August 7, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, “Review of the Terrorist Attacks on U.S. Facilities in Benghazi, Libya, September 11-12, 2012,” January 15, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Siobhan Gorman and Matt Bradley, “Militant Link to Libya Attack,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 1, 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Mohammed Abbas, “Libya Prisoner Release Stokes Fears of Tribal Strife,” Reuters, March 3, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Nick Meo, “Libya: Prisoners Released or Escaped in Their Hundreds,” *Telegraph* (U.K.), August 23, 2011.

Moving beyond Muhammad Jamal, other prominent figures from Egypt's jihadist movement were also freed from prison. The most notorious is Muhammad al-Zawahiri, the brother of al-Qaeda's emir and a former member of Egyptian Islamic Jihad. Zawahiri played a prominent role in encouraging jihadists to join the September 2012 attack on the U.S. embassy in Cairo, and American officials told *The Wall Street Journal* that he has also helped Muhammad Jamal connect with his brother, the al-Qaeda chief. Other released Egyptian inmates returned to operational and media roles, including Murjan Salim, who has been directing jihadists to training camps in Libya. Figures like Jalal al-Din Abu al-Fatuh and Ahmad 'Ashush, among others, helped loosely reorganize networks through media outlets al-Bayyan and al-Faruq. Prisoner releases helped regenerate jihadist networks in the Sinai that have been able to cause a great deal of bloodshed since the country's July coup.

Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia's striking growth was also attributable to prisoner releases. AST leader Abu Iyadh al-Tunisi had been imprisoned since 2003 for involvement in terrorism abroad, but was released in the general amnesty of March 2011. In fact, prominent AST members have claimed that the organization was born during periods of imprisonment, when "communal prayer time served as a forum for discussion and refining ideas that would be put into practice on release."<sup>30</sup>

In Libya, many former prisoners, including some leaders of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, said they would forsake armed struggle and join the political process. But other released prisoners returned to jihadist violence. Mohammed al-Zahawi and Shaykh Nasir al-Tarshani of Katibat Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi both spent years in Qaddafi's notorious Abu Salim prison.<sup>31</sup> Abu Sufyan bin Qumu, another Ansar al-Sharia leader based in Derna, was formerly imprisoned in both Guantánamo Bay and Abu Salim.

*Dawa opportunities.* Newfound opportunities to undertake *dawa* allowed the spread of salafi jihadist ideology in places like Egypt and Tunisia. In Egypt, members of the salafi jihadist current such as Muhammad al-Zawahiri and Ahmad 'Ashush were able to personally advocate for the movement on television for the first time.

In Tunisia, AST developed a sophisticated *dawa* strategy. It continues to undertake *dawa* even after the Tunisian government banned it, but AST youth leader Youssef Mazouz said the group now carries out "less than half the work it used to before August when it could plan events openly and post details on Facebook."<sup>32</sup> Some of AST's *dawa* efforts have been rather traditional: holding *dawa* events at markets or universities, holding public protests, and dominating physical spaces, such as cafés, near places of worship. But AST also used innovative approaches to *dawa*, including provision of social services (something other militant Islamic groups like Hizballah and Hamas have also done) and its use of social media. As noted, AST's ban now impedes its ability to leverage social media.

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<sup>30</sup> Louise Loveluck, "Planting the Seeds of Tunisia's Ansar al-Sharia," *Foreign Policy*, September 27, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Fitzgerald, "It Wasn't Us," *Foreign Policy*, September 18, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> "The Salafist Struggle," *The Economist*, January 1, 2014.

AST's social services activity has included distribution of food, clothing, and basic supplies, as well as sponsorship of convoys that provide both medical care and medicine. These efforts concentrated on areas of Tunisia that are typically neglected by the government, such as rural and impoverished areas, and AST also provided emergency humanitarian assistance in the wake of such natural disasters as flooding. AST's social services are typically accompanied by distribution of literature designed to propagate its ideology. But even at its height, AST's distribution of social services didn't reach the same areas consistently: it isn't clear any communities saw AST as a services provider week after week. This is where AST's savvy use of social media was particularly relevant. Almost immediately after it undertook humanitarian efforts, AST would post information about its latest venture, including photographs, to its Facebook page and other websites. Social media served as a force multiplier: while AST didn't provide consistent services to a single area, its social media activity illustrated a rapid pace of humanitarian assistance, and thus helped the group achieve its goal of visibility.

The context in which this *dawa* work was undertaken is important, as the country's economy suffered and much of its revolutionary hopes had faded. AST positioned itself as a critic of the status quo and a champion of those whom the system neglected. This helped AST develop into a growing movement by the last time I did field research there, in April 2013. Whether the new Tunisian constitution will rekindle revolutionary hopes remains to be seen.

*Resurgence of jihadist-aligned charity networks.* Prior to the 9/11 attacks, al-Qaeda received significant funding from a well-financed network of Islamist charity organizations. As a monograph produced for the 9/11 Commission noted, prior to those attacks "al-Qaeda was funded, to the tune of approximately \$30 million per year, by diversions of money from Islamic charities and the use of well-placed financial facilitators who gathered money from both witting and unwitting donors."<sup>33</sup> Despite the efforts made to shut down such groups, Islamist-leaning international charities and other NGOs have been reemerging as sponsors of jihadist activity.

In Tunisia, the pictures, videos, and information that AST posted on its Facebook page suggest that AST received support from jihadist charity networks. In at least one case, it received medical supplies from the Kuwaiti charity RIHS (the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society). The fact that RIHS supported a jihadist-oriented group in Tunisia will come as no surprise to seasoned watchers of terrorist financing. The U.S. Treasury Department designated RIHS in 2008 "for providing financial and material support to al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda affiliates, including Lashkar e-Tayyiba, Jemaah Islamiyah, and Al-Itihaad al-Islamiya."<sup>34</sup> The Treasury designation also charges that RIHS provided financial support specifically for terrorist acts. And that's not AST's only connection to sympathetic foreign organizations. The literature it passes out at *dawa* events can be traced to at least three book publishing houses in Saudi Arabia: Dar al-Qassem, based in Riyadh; Dar al-Tarafan, based in Taif; and the Cooperative Office for the Call and

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<sup>33</sup> National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *Monograph on Terrorist Financing* (2004), p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Kuwaiti Charity Designated for Bankrolling al-Qaeda Network," June 13, 2008.

Guidance and Education Communities, based in Dammam. It's likely that AST, which has distributed a significant amount of these publishers' literature, either has a direct relationship with the publishers or else a designated intermediary.

The most significant theater for jihadist charities' rebound, though, will likely be Syria. A recent comprehensive report published by the Brookings Institution notes the role of "individual donors in the Gulf," who "encouraged the founding of armed groups, helped to shape the ideological and at times extremist agendas of rebel brigades, and contributed to the fracturing of the military opposition."<sup>35</sup> The report singles out Kuwaiti donors and charities in particular—including the aforementioned RIHS—in part because Kuwait has had fewer controls than other Gulf countries.

Further, the Syrian Islamic Front (SIF)—an umbrella group of six organizations that is considered one of the key jihadist elements within the Syrian opposition—has clearly expressed ties to Turkish and Qatari government-linked NGOs. The video proclaiming the creation of this new group in December 2012 showed SIF members providing aid to Syrian civilians with boxes and flags bearing the logos of the Turkish Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH). In January 2013, SIF posted a video to YouTube depicting its members picking up aid from IHH in Yayladagi, Turkey, that was to be distributed in Syria. Other boxes and flags in SIF's December 2012 video belonged to Qatar Charity, which used to go by the name Qatar Charitable Society. Evidence submitted by the U.S. government in a criminal trial noted that in 1993 Osama bin Laden named the society as one of several charities that were used to fund al-Qaeda's overseas operations.

Other charities that in the past supported al-Qaeda and jihadist causes may also be on the rebound. For example, when the U.S. Treasury Department designated the Al Haramain Islamic Foundation (AHIF), a Saudi charity that provided significant support to al-Qaeda internationally, it noted that AHIF's leadership "has attempted to reconstitute the operations of the organization, and parts of the organization have continued to operate."<sup>36</sup> Further, the U.N.'s Office of the Ombudsperson overseeing sanctions of al-Qaeda-linked individuals has produced a delisting in 38 different cases as of the time of this testimony.<sup>37</sup> The delisting of al-Qaeda supporters at the United Nations could further re-energize al-Qaeda charity networks.

## **Al-Qaeda Today**

Over the past year, al-Qaeda's affiliates and other jihadist groups have made striking gains. Both the organization and the movement appear to be growing rather than withering.

Syria is the central front for transnational jihadism. Extremist groups like Jabhat

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<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Dickinson, *Playing with Fire: Why Private Gulf Financing for Syria's Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2013), p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Treasury Designates Al Haramain Islamic Foundation," June 19, 2008.

<sup>37</sup> The status of cases being considered by the Ombudsperson's office can be found at <http://www.un.org/en/sc/ombudsperson/status.shtml>.

al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) have proven to be some of the country's most effective rebel factions. Jihadists have gained full control over such cities and towns as Raqqa and Shadadi in the north. ISIS has in fact become adept at the targeted use of violence against Raqqa's citizens, for the purposes of dominating and intimidating them as it implements a harsh version of *sharia*.<sup>38</sup> Further compounding concerns stemming from the Syria conflict, a recent study published by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation found that up to 11,000 foreign fighters have flocked to the battlefield to fight Bashar Assad's government, of whom around 2,000 are from Western Europe.<sup>39</sup> This has sparked fears in their countries of origin that the fighters could pose a security threat upon their return.

It's worth noting the escalating tensions between ISIS and AQSL.<sup>40</sup> I believe it's far too early to claim, as some analysts already have, that this means we have clearly entered a period where al-Qaeda's core leadership has become marginalized. Indeed, al-Qaeda's loyalists can be found at top levels of two of the most effective groups in Syria even if one discounts their role in ISIS entirely. But it's worth following this conflict closely, as the ramifications are important.

In addition to Syria's instability, Libya's central government has never been able to establish itself following the NATO campaign that helped overthrow Qaddafi. The deteriorating conditions have helped the jihadist cause. Some of the attackers in the January operation at the gas facility located in In Amenas, Algeria, reportedly trained in southern Libya camps, and used the country as a staging ground for the hostage-taking operation.<sup>41</sup> Those camps have also been used to prepare militants for suicide missions; and Libya's lawlessness has provided jihadist militants space to operate, as many fled there to evade pursuit after the French intervention in Mali.<sup>42</sup>

Iraq has also been backsliding into chaos, driven by ISIS's blossoming capabilities. By the end of 2013, more than 6,000 Iraqis had died in violence, the highest level of fatalities since 2007, the peak year of Iraq's bloody civil war. As U.S. forces withdrew from Iraq two years ago, American and Iraqi officials expressed concern that al-Qaeda was "poised for a deadly resurgence."<sup>43</sup> Rather than proving alarmist, these warnings likely understated the speed and magnitude of the organization's rebound. On January 1, ISIS was able to capture large portions of Fallujah and Ramadi, and as of the preparation of this testimony (January 27), it continues to retain significant ground in both, as well as elsewhere in Anbar. The fact that it was able to seize and hold large portions of both cities, and caught the Iraqi security forces unaware when it did so, is testament to ISIS's regeneration.

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<sup>38</sup> Chris Looney, "Al-Qaeda's Governance Strategy in Raqqa," *Syria Comment*, December 8, 2013.

<sup>39</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin et al., "Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria; Steep Rise Among Western Europeans," *ICSR Insight*, December 17, 2013.

<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., Ben Hubbard, "The Franchising of al-Qaeda," *New York Times*, January 25, 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Cruickshank and Tim Lister, "Algeria Attack May Have Link to Libya Camps," CNN, January 23, 2013.

<sup>42</sup> Adam Entous, Drew Hinshaw and David Gauthier-Villars, "Militants, Chased from Mali, Pose New Threats," *Wall Street Journal*, May 24, 2013.

<sup>43</sup> Michael S. Schmidt and Eric Schmitt, "Leaving Iraq, U.S. Fears New Surge of Qaeda Terror," *New York Times*, November 5, 2011.

Another al-Qaeda franchise that is seemingly recovering its capabilities, based on the attacks it was able to execute, is the Somali militant group al-Shabaab. Shabaab once controlled more territory in southern Somalia than did the country's U.N.-recognized government, but it lost its last major urban stronghold of Kismayo to advancing African Union forces in October 2012. However, Shabaab's capabilities have recovered since then. The group captured worldwide attention on September 21, 2013, when terrorists associated with the group launched a spectacular assault on Nairobi's Westgate Mall. The attack dragged on for four days, killing 67 and injuring at least 175.

But even before that, there were signs that a complex operation like Westgate was possible, as Shabaab carried out increasingly sophisticated attacks throughout the year. These included an April 2013 attack on a Mogadishu courthouse that killed 29, and a June 2013 twin suicide bombing at Mogadishu's U.N. compound that claimed 22 lives. Over the course of 2013, Shabaab was able to kill between 515 and 664 people, according to a database that I maintain.

But al-Qaeda's biggest gain last year was perhaps the July military coup that deposed Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi, and the often-brutal crackdown on protesters that followed. After the coup, jihadist groups in the Sinai went on an immediate offensive, with targets including security officers and Christians. That offensive has both extended beyond the Sinai region and continued into this year, with a series of four January 24 bombings in Greater Cairo, including an explosion at the security directorate.

Egypt's coup also bolstered al-Qaeda's narrative. Many Western observers had hoped the Arab uprisings would weaken al-Qaeda by providing a democratic alternative to the region's dictators. These hopes rested on an inexorable march toward democracy that would prompt increasing numbers of citizens to participate in the new political systems. But the coup showed that democracy is reversible—perhaps particularly so if political Islamist groups are in power. Al-Qaeda emir Ayman al-Zawahiri had been saying exactly this since the revolutions began—claiming in March 2011 that Egypt's new regime, even if nominally democratic, would “preserve and maintain the old policies that fight Islam and marginalize the *sharia*.” Though it's too early to say whether more people are gravitating toward al-Qaeda's argument as a result, Zawahiri and other leading jihadist thinkers have already claimed vindication after the coup, and we can expect more full-throated rhetoric on this point in the coming year.

Al-Qaeda also continues to be a force in its traditional strongholds. For example, it has spearheaded an assassination campaign in Yemen that has, for more than two years, targeted the country's military officers.

Bearing in mind the manner in which prisoner releases gave new life to jihadism in North Africa, a final concern is a series of jailbreaks in July. The most significant was a July 21 jailbreak at Iraq's notorious Abu Ghraib prison that freed about 500 prisoners from a facility boasting a high concentration of skilled jihadists. On July 28, prison riots coupled with an external attack freed 1,117 inmates from Benghazi's Kuafiya prison.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> “Clashes Erupt in Benghazi After Blasts,” Al Jazeera, July 29, 2013.

And a sophisticated July 30 prison break in Pakistan, where almost 250 prisoners escaped, was claimed by the militant group Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan.<sup>45</sup> Some of the least surprising news of the year was that U.S. officials came to suspect that these incidents, all occurring around the same time, might “be part of an al Qaeda-coordinated ‘Great Escape’-like plot.”<sup>46</sup>

### **Conclusion: Al-Qaeda and U.S. Policy**

As I stated at the outset, the Arab Spring environment has both altered al-Qaeda’s focus and also helped the group, and jihadism more broadly, to experience growth. I offer four major policy recommendations.

First, it is important to beware of second-order consequences related to al-Qaeda and jihadism when the U.S. decides to use its military might or otherwise commit significant resources internationally. There were significant second-order consequences to the U.S. campaigns in both Iraq and Libya. Of course, the primary rationale for the intervention in Libya was humanitarian, but as long as al-Qaeda and jihadism remain a strategic priority for the United States, it is vital to understand the impact of major U.S. commitments on these phenomena. In a similar vein, while America’s indecisiveness didn’t help it on the world stage after Syria’s Bashar al-Assad crossed a U.S.-announced “red line” in August by using chemical weapons against rebel forces, American military action in Syria likely would have carried even greater risks.

The risk of second-order consequences gives rise to a second priority. Better harnessing the talents of open-source analysts has the potential to sharpen U.S. counterterrorism policies and alert policymakers to possible pitfalls. This testimony has outlined two competing views of al-Qaeda, and it’s worth noting that public discussion of the jihadist group is impeded by the fact that open-source analysts lack basic information about the al-Qaeda network that can be found in such primary source documents as those recovered after the raid that killed bin Laden in Abbottabad. The seventeen Abbottabad documents that the U.S. government released in 2012 represent less than 1% of the total cache of information, and they don’t even contain a single complete correspondence. To improve public sphere discussion about al-Qaeda, declassification of those documents should be hastened.

Third, we need to recognize the limitations of the U.S.’s targeted-killing campaign. The pace of this campaign strongly suggests that it is premised around the idea that an attrition-based strategy can defeat al-Qaeda. But if al-Qaeda is resilient in the face of this kind of attrition, it’s important to think more comprehensively about the impact of the strikes, including the consequences when innocent people are killed. While the U.S. shouldn’t simply eschew targeted killing as one counterterrorism tool, we should seriously consider the idea that the tactic is being massively overused.

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<sup>45</sup> Jeremy Ravinsky, “Jailbreak! Security Found Lacking in Iraq, Libya, Pakistan,” *Christian Science Monitor*, July 30, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> James Gordon Meek and Rebecca Bluit, “Al-Qaeda’s ‘Great Escape’ Plot? Hundreds of Terrorists Freed,” ABC News, November 1, 2013.

Finally, partner-nation assistance is important. President Obama correctly observed that not all al-Qaeda affiliates pose an equal risk to the United States (although it should be noted that if a group isn't targeting the U.S., that doesn't mean that it isn't actually al-Qaeda). It's important that the U.S. not bear all the costs in the fight against the jihadist group, and burden-sharing has improved under Obama. Partner-nation assistance can take the form of building local police capacity, as capable local police can respond more effectively to the growth of salafi jihadist groups. Another important form of partner-nation assistance is intelligence cooperation.

Thank you for inviting me to testify today. I look forward to your questions.