

**ASSESSING THE THREAT TO THE HOMELAND
FROM AL-QAEDA OPERATIONS IN IRAN AND
SYRIA**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON
COUNTERTERRORISM
AND INTELLIGENCE**

OF THE

**COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

ONE HUNDRED THIRTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

MAY 22, 2013

Serial No. 113-19

Printed for the use of the Committee on Homeland Security



Available via the World Wide Web: <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/>

U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE

85-684 PDF

WASHINGTON : 2013

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office
Internet: bookstore.gpo.gov Phone: toll free (866) 512-1800; DC area (202) 512-1800
Fax: (202) 512-2250 Mail: Stop SSOP, Washington, DC 20402-0001

COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

MICHAEL T. MCCAUL, Texas, *Chairman*

LAMAR SMITH, Texas	BENNIE G. THOMPSON, Mississippi
PETER T. KING, New York	LORETTA SANCHEZ, California
MIKE ROGERS, Alabama	SHEILA JACKSON LEE, Texas
PAUL C. BROUN, Georgia	YVETTE D. CLARKE, New York
CANDICE S. MILLER, Michigan, <i>Vice Chair</i>	BRIAN HIGGINS, New York
PATRICK MEEHAN, Pennsylvania	CEDRIC L. RICHMOND, Louisiana
JEFF DUNCAN, South Carolina	WILLIAM R. KEATING, Massachusetts
TOM MARINO, Pennsylvania	RON BARBER, Arizona
JASON CHAFFETZ, Utah	DONDALD M. PAYNE, JR., New Jersey
STEVEN M. PALAZZO, Mississippi	BETO O'ROURKE, Texas
LOU BARLETTA, Pennsylvania	TULSI GABBARD, Hawaii
CHRIS STEWART, Utah	FILEMON VELA, Texas
RICHARD HUDSON, North Carolina	STEVEN A. HORSFORD, Nevada
STEVE DAINES, Montana	ERIC SWALWELL, California
SUSAN W. BROOKS, Indiana	
SCOTT PERRY, Pennsylvania	
VACANCY	

GREG HILL, *Chief of Staff*

MICHAEL GEFFROY, *Deputy Chief of Staff/Chief Counsel*

MICHAEL S. TWINCHEK, *Chief Clerk*

I. LANIER AVANT, *Minority Staff Director*

SUBCOMMITTEE ON COUNTERTERRORISM AND INTELLIGENCE

PETER T. KING, New York, *Chairman*

PAUL C. BROUN, Georgia	BRIAN HIGGINS, New York
PATRICK MEEHAN, Pennsylvania	LORETTA SANCHEZ, California
JASON CHAFFETZ, Utah	WILLIAM R. KEATING, Massachusetts
CHRIS STEWART, Utah	BENNIE G. THOMPSON, Mississippi (<i>ex officio</i>)
MICHAEL T. MCCAUL, Texas (<i>ex officio</i>)	

KERRY ANN WATKINS, *Subcommittee Staff Director*

DENNIS TERRY, *Subcommittee Clerk*

HOPE GOINS, *Minority Staff Director*

CONTENTS

	Page
STATEMENTS	
The Honorable Peter T. King, a Representative in Congress From the State of New York, and Chairman, Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence	1
The Honorable Brian Higgins, a Representative in Congress From the State of New York, and Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence:	
Oral Statement	4
Prepared Statement	5
The Honorable Bennie G. Thompson, a Representative in Congress From the State of Mississippi, and Ranking Member, Committee on Homeland Security:	
Prepared Statement	7
WITNESSES	
Mr. Seth G. Jones, Ph.D., Associate Director, International Security and Defense Policy Center:	
Oral Statement	8
Prepared Statement	10
Mr. Robin Simcox, Research Fellow, The Henry Jackson Society:	
Oral Statement	15
Prepared Statement	16
Mr. Thomas Joscelyn, Senior Fellow, Foundation for the Defense of Democracies:	
Oral Statement	19
Prepared Statement	21
Mr. Barak Barfi, Research Fellow, New America Foundation:	
Oral Statement	29
Prepared Statement	31

ASSESSING THE THREAT TO THE HOMELAND FROM AL-QAEDA OPERATIONS IN IRAN AND SYRIA

Wednesday, May 22, 2013

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON COUNTERTERRORISM AND INTELLIGENCE,
Washington, DC.

The subcommittee met, pursuant to call, at 10:00 a.m., in Room 311, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Peter T. King [Chairman of the subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives King, Stewart, and Higgins.

Also present: Representative Jackson Lee.

Mr. KING. Good morning. The Committee on Homeland Security Subcommittee on Counterterrorism Intelligence will come to order.

The subcommittee is meeting today to hear testimony examining the threat to the homeland for al-Qaeda operatives in Iran and Syria, and want to welcome all of the witnesses, say thank you for giving us your time, and now I will recognize myself for an opening statement.

Before I make the statement, I would like to comment on the fact that we have been advised that there was a shooting in Florida today, which seems to have some relationship to the Boston marathon investigation.

The FBI was, as we have been told, interrogating a Chechen who had an involvement—an alleged involvement with the older brother and what we are told so far is that the person being questioned actually pulled a knife and stabbed the FBI agent and then the assailant was killed on the spot.

So again, I think it shows that the tentacles of these terrorist connections often go beyond what we first anticipate and also without pre-judging anything makes me wonder again how much information we missed by the interrogation being cut short of the younger brother in Boston at the time.

But I say that only because I think many of us will agree in many ways it is a seamless web. There are disconnects but there are also a seamless web among various terrorist groups and we have to basically, you know, be looking at every possible threat.

With that, I want to welcome the witnesses today for this hearing, “Assessing the Threat to the Homeland From al-Qaeda Operations in Iran and Syria.”

This hearing continues the Counterterrorism and Intelligence Subcommittee’s plan for the 113th Congress.

I say at the outset that the Ranking Member, Brian Higgins, and I think are on certainly full agreement as to where the subcommittee is going. Whether we agree on everything as we go along, who knows, but we certainly have the same intent and the same focus and I really look forward to the, you know, this session.

We will be examining current threats, detecting emerging threats, and overseeing intelligence sharing between Federal, State, and local governments.

Today we are examining safe havens in Syria and Iran from which al-Qaeda could target the homeland, the relationship between al-Qaeda and Iran, the threat to the United States from foreign jihadis in Syria, and how Syrian instability may impact al-Qaeda's capabilities.

On April 22 the RCMP, the Canadian Mounties, arrested two Islamists, Raed Jaser and Chiheb Esseghaier. I am not sure I have that exactly right, but you know what we are talking about.

At the direction of al-Qaeda members in Iran, these men planned to derail a passenger train from Toronto, as it passed over Niagara Falls en route to New York City.

I will point out of course they we are talking about Congressman Higgins' district and a district very close to mine in New York, and I say that as a preview to what we will say later on about the lack of information we were given on this.

On May 9 American authorities arrested Ahmed Abassi, an associate of these men in the United States, who also supported al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate.

Now, had their terror plot succeeded, American and Canadian civilian casualties in New York could have been catastrophic.

Let me say up front as I started to mention before, the Committee on Homeland Security was never briefed, even in classified settings, about this year-long investigation of a serious threat against the homeland.

Obviously, a threat against any American is a threat against all Americans but I think it was particularly egregious in this case that when you have two Members of Congress from New York in the area impacted by this that the Department of Homeland Security—nobody in the intelligence committee, the law enforcement community, at any time advised me and I don't think they advised Congressman Higgins during the last year about this. To me, that is inexcusable.

It is something which we, as Chairman of the committee and now as Chairman of the counterterrorism subcommittee and Ranking Member Higgins, we attend weekly, biweekly briefings from the FBI, from the National Counterterrorism Center, from the Department of Homeland Security where we are told and advised of so many possible plots, all of the investigations that are going on, and yet this one which was so key, we were never told anything about.

To me, it is just inexcusable and basically I am passing on to the—all of those agencies and departments of that this is not going to be tolerated.

It is a—there is no excuse whatsoever for holding back on this type of information. Also my understanding is that New York State and local police were not briefed about this plot, either.

Now, we have seen this pattern for years now, most recently in the Boston Marathon bombing and the planned follow-up attack on Times Square and the Fort Hood and Little Rock shootings.

The Federal Government identifies potential terrorists or attack plans, but does not share the knowledge with State and local police. Again I would say the fact that in Boston where the FBI was advised of a possible attack against Time Square and did not notify the NYPD and their theory was well the plot was over, the threat had ended, the fact is as we saw with the killing in Florida today, perhaps that plot was not over and it had not ended. So again, I just pass on that to the FBI the importance of information sharing. Turf battles should have ended on September 11, 2001.

This information sharing was urged by the 9/11 Commission and ordered by the Homeland Security and Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Acts.

Now, there is much we don't know about the relationship between Iran and al-Qaeda. As Churchill described Germany and Stalin with their Union in 1939, it is a "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma."

The Iranian regime is a state sponsor of terror, and al-Qaeda is a terror organization. But Tehran's ayatollahs are Shi'i Muslims and al-Qaeda are Sunni Muslims.

For this reason Iran and al-Qaeda are enemies under some circumstances. In Syria, Tehran's proxies, the Assad regime and Hezbollah, fight against the Syrian opposition, which unfortunately now is a substantial al-Qaeda influence and presence. Iranian terror proxies and al-Qaeda also fight each other in Iraq.

On the other hand, since 2001 some senior leaders on al-Qaeda's management council have resided in Iran. Al-Qaeda uses Iran as facilitation, finance, and transport hub.

From this sanctuary al-Qaeda ordered attacks against Westerners in Saudi Arabia in 2003. But our Government's assumption was that al-Qaeda would not allow al-Qaeda to plot against America from within Iran.

This latest al-Qaeda plot against New York, hatched from inside Iran, makes us question this assumption. A similar reassessment of Iran's intentions was caused by Iran's 2011 plot to partner with a Mexican drug cartel to assassinate a Saudi ambassador by means of a car bomb here in Washington, DC.

Greatly adding to our concerns are the following facts. Al-Qaeda in Syria, also known as the Nusra Front, is an outgrowth of al-Qaeda's vicious Iraqi affiliate. It is responsible for the vast majority of suicide attacks in Syria.

Among the several thousand members of the Nusra Front are, according to unclassified sources, a large number of foreign jihadis with Belgian, Dutch, Danish, Dutch—British, Danish, Dutch, German, Finnish, French, or Swedish citizenship or residency.

Europeans constitute as much as 10 percent of this al-Qaeda's affiliate strength. Canadians, Australians, and perhaps even Americans have gone to Syria to fight alongside—or even with—al-Qaeda.

These foreign fighters will likely undergo further Islamist radicalization as they receive terror training and gain combat experience before returning home to the West.

The border between Syria and Turkey, a Muslim Brotherhood-led country which is itself a cause of growing terror concerns, is porous. It will be difficult for U.S. authorities to determine, going forward, whether a European or British Commonwealth citizen or a returning U.S. person may have been inside Syria.

The Syrian situation is made more dangerous by the availability—and even use—of military-grade chemical weapons.

If even a fraction of Syria's vast stockpile of poisonous and toxic gases falls into the hands of terrorist groups, these weapons of mass destruction will pose a grave threat to homeland security.

With that want to thank all of the witnesses today; especially look forward to any testimony you may have involving bin Laden's son-in-law who was captured and had been spending time in Iran and what impact that has.

But I would think the witnesses.

Now I am pleased to recognize the Ranking Member, Brian Higgins, for his opening statement.

Mr. HIGGINS. I would like to thank Chairman Peter King for holding this hearing; today's hearing.

I would also like to thank the witnesses for their testimony.

Assessing the threats the United States from al-Qaeda operatives in Iran and Syria is uncharted territory for this subcommittee.

Even though exploring the subject is new to the subcommittee, I believe it is our responsibility, and I thank the Chairman for agreeing to hold this hearing.

On April 22, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police announced the arrest of two people in connection with plotting a terrorist attack on a passenger train that travels from Toronto through Niagara Falls into New York City.

According to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the alleged terrorists were receiving assistance from al-Qaeda elements in Iran. The RCMP stated that there was no connection to state sponsorship.

If these allegations are true, it would mark the first time al-Qaeda elements in Iran directed a plot at the West. Soon after the news of the arrests of the terrorists broke, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman stated that there was no firm evidence of any Iranian involvement and such groups as al-Qaeda have no compatibility with Iran in both political and ideological fields.

Iran is a Shi'i majority country. Only about 8 to 10 percent of the population is Sunni and al-Qaeda is a Sunni organization. Even though there are political and ideological differences between Iran and al-Qaeda, there is a need to look deeper at their relationships.

Several al-Qaeda operatives have made Iran their home. In 2001, when the United States Government took out the Taliban government, many of bin Laden's family members and top lieutenants self-exiled to Iran.

In the past, Iran kept a very close eye on all al-Qaeda figures in the country. Iranian intelligence services have access to all communications and contacts.

However, these restrictions have been loosened and this should raise questions about whether al-Qaeda operatives in Iran are making trips outside the country to make connections with a broader terror network.

As we evaluate al-Qaeda's relationship with Iran, we must be sure not to look at it in a myopic view. We need to evaluate both al-Qaeda and Iran's relationships with the areas of the Middle East; especially areas of conflict.

Hezbollah, a terrorist organization supported by Iran has a growing and active role in the war in Syria. Hezbollah is an ally of President Assad and is aiding government forces in this Syrian Civil War.

Al-Qaeda operatives on the other hand have been traveling to Syria to bring down the Syrian regime. As the violence grows in Syria it becomes more sectarian bringing Hezbollah and al-Qaeda fighting face-to-face with each other.

Will the conflict between Iranian-backed Hezbollah and al-Qaeda elements in Syria have a grave effect on the United States? What will this conflict do to al-Qaeda's relationship with Iran?

As the recent Canadian plot brings questions about al-Qaeda's role in both Iran and Syria, there are still questions that should be raised about al-Qaeda's effect in the West.

The plot brings the question of whether al-Qaeda operatives in Iran are looking to Canada as their target for terrorist activity and recruitment. Canada's being a target for terrorist activity and recruitment is startling because a successful plot can cause catastrophic loss to the United States.

In addition to the potential for innocent people in two countries being killed or injured, or people from two countries being killed or injured, there is a possibility of grave damage to critical infrastructure and the economy of western New York in southern Ontario.

The Peace Bridge in Buffalo is a busy Northern Border crossing for automobiles in the United States. It is a local symbol and architectural icon for the Buffalo Niagara region. It is one of America's busiest corridors for international travel and trade.

Canada is the United States' No. 1 trading partner. In 2011, over \$597 billion of imports and exports were traded with Canada. Over \$30 billion in annual commerce travels through the Peace Bridge. This Western New York region is the first point of entry into the United States between Toronto and New York City where the terrorists were attempting to attack.

The security of our border should be a priority and this means that first responders who are familiar with the border in the area should be fully funded to prepare and prevent an attack.

This also means that information that the Federal Government has related to a potential attack should be adequately shared with State and local partners. Having the information is key to preventing an attack from groups from both foreign and domestic.

We can expand our knowledge today and I look forward to hearing today's testimony.

I yield back.

[The statement of Ranking Member Higgins follows:]

STATEMENT OF RANKING MEMBER BRIAN HIGGINS

MAY 22, 2013

Assessing the threat to the United States from al-Qaeda operatives in Iran and Syria is uncharted territory for this subcommittee. Even though exploring this

subject is new to the subcommittee, I believe it is our responsibility and I thank the Chairman for agreeing to hold this hearing.

On April 22, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police announced an arrest of two people in connection with plotting a terrorist attack on a passenger train that travels from Toronto, through Niagara Falls, into New York City. According to the RCMP, the alleged terrorists were receiving assistance from al-Qaeda elements in Iran. The RCMP stated that there was no connection to state sponsorship. If these allegations are true, it would mark the first time al-Qaeda elements in Iran directed a plot at the West.

Soon after the news of the arrests of the terrorists broke, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman stated that there is no firm evidence of any Iranian involvement and groups such as al-Qaeda have no compatibility with Iran in both political and ideological fields.

Iran is a Shia majority country, only about 8 to 10 percent of the population is Sunni and al-Qaeda is a Sunni organization. Even though there are political and ideological differences between Iran and al-Qaeda, there is a need to look deeper at their relationships.

Iran is home to al-Qaeda operatives. In 2001, when United States Government took out the Taliban government in Afghanistan, many of Osama bin Laden's family members and top lieutenants self-exiled to Iran. In the past, Iran kept a very close eye on all al-Qaeda figures in the country. Iranian intelligence services had access to all communications and contacts.

However, these restrictions have been loosened. This should raise questions about whether al-Qaeda operatives in Iran are making trips outside of the country to make connections with the broader terror network.

As we evaluate al-Qaeda's relationship with Iran, we must be sure not to look at it in a myopic view. We need to evaluate both al-Qaeda's and Iran's relationships with other areas of the Middle East, especially areas of conflict.

Hezbollah, a terrorist organization supported by Iran, has a growing and active role in war-torn Syria. Hezbollah is an ally of President Assad and is aiding government forces in Syria. Al-Qaeda operatives, on the other hand, have been traveling to Syria to bring down the Syrian regime. As the violence grows in Syria, it becomes more sectarian, bringing Hezbollah and al-Qaeda fighting face-to-face with each other.

Will the conflict between Iranian-backed Hezbollah and al-Qaeda elements in Syria have a grave effect on the United States? What will this conflict do to al-Qaeda's relationship with Iran? As the recent Canadian plot brings questions about al-Qaeda's role in both Iran and Syria, there are still questions that should be raised about al-Qaeda's effect in the West. The recent plot in Canada also brings the question of whether al-Qaeda operatives in Iran have a broader terror network, and if Canada serves as their target for terrorist activity and recruitment.

Canada being a target for terrorist activity and recruitment is startling because a successful plot can cause catastrophic loss to the United States. In addition to the potential for innocent people from two countries being killed and injured, there is a possibility of grave damage to critical infrastructure and the economy.

The Peace Bridge in Buffalo is the busiest border crossing for automobiles in the United States. It is a local symbol and an architectural icon for the Buffalo Niagara region. It is one of America's busiest corridors for international travel and trade. Canada is the United States' No. 1 trading partner. In 2011, over \$597.4 billion of imports and exports were traded with Canada. Over \$30 billion of annual commerce travels through the Peace Bridge in Buffalo, Niagara region. This region is the first point of entry into the United States between Toronto and New York City, where the terrorists were attempting to attack.

The security of our border should be a priority and this means that first responders should be fully funded to prepare and prevent an attack. This also means that information that the Federal Government has related to a potential attack should be adequately shared with State and local partners. Having the information is key in preventing an attack from groups both foreign and domestic. We can expand our knowledge today.

Mr. KING. I thank the Ranking Member for his opening statement.

Other Members of the committee are reminded that opening statements may be submitted for the record.

[The statement of Ranking Member Thompson follows:]

STATEMENT OF RANKING MEMBER BENNIE G. THOMPSON

MAY 22, 2013

Today's hearing is an assessment on the threat from al-Qaeda operatives in the Republic of Iran and the Syrian Arab Republic. Both Iran and Syria have tense relationships with the United States. The United States does not consider these countries as allies, is a welcome criterion for al-Qaeda to operate and thrive in these two regions.

We know that radicalization by the al-Qaeda extremist ideology and communication with al-Qaeda is widespread and accessible. Vulnerable areas such as Syria, which is crippling under a civil war, could potentially be a safe haven for al-Qaeda operatives to radicalize and train militants.

The Republic of Iran has been home to top al-Qaeda operatives for over a decade. In the past, the government closely monitored their dealings within the state. However, recent actions by the Iranian government illustrate that their interactions with al-Qaeda may have become lax. However, it is my hope as we evaluate the threat from al-Qaeda operatives in these countries, we give a fair, thorough, and critical assessment. This evaluation should not only include testimony from today's hearing, but also information that we receive from the State Department and the intelligence community.

On April 22, 2013, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police arrested two individuals for plotting a terrorist attack on a passenger rail train that travels from Toronto, through the Northern Border at Niagara Falls to New York City. According to authorities, the alleged perpetrators received assistance from al-Qaeda operatives in Iran. As of today, the authorities do not see this foiled plot as a link to a plot directed by the Iranian government. The Iranian government also denies any involvement in this plot. Even though there is not evidence that shows that there is a link to the Iranian government and these perpetrators, Iran, as a state sponsor of terrorism, and its relationship with al-Qaeda should be evaluated. This thwarted plot also gives rise to other issues that should be given another thorough evaluation.

First, the threat to mass transit is not novel. According to the National Counter-Terrorism Center's Worldwide Incidents Tracking System, from January 2004 to July 2008, 530 terrorist attacks were waged worldwide against mass transit and passenger rail targets, resulting in over 2,000 deaths and over 9,000 injuries. In the United States, a plot to attack the New York City subway system was thwarted in September 2009. The convicted conspirators stated they were directed by al-Qaeda. Thirty-four million rail and transit passenger trips are taken within the United States each weekday. However, the Transportation Security Administration's budget for surface transportation security remains less than 2% of TSA's budget.

Another issue that should be evaluated is the Northern Border. To date, over the last decade, the Department of Homeland Security, with support from Congress, has made unprecedented investments in border security. During my time on this committee, I have consistently advocated for a comprehensive strategy to help guide how border security funding is utilized.

Last week, the Committee passed H.R. 1417, which requires the DHS to develop a comprehensive strategy and implementation plan for achieving operational control of our borders. The bill sets a goal for the Secretary to certify to Congress that operational control of the border has been achieved in high traffic areas, which includes Northern Border areas such as Niagara Falls, within 2 years.

Another evaluation to consider is the cost of terrorism. Had this plot been successful, it could have affected some of the busiest border crossings in the Nation. The border crossings in along the Northern Border between New York and Canada are linked to over \$200 billion in annual U.S. sales, income, and Federal taxes. We know that one of the goals of al-Qaeda is to cause economic disruption.

The attacks of September 11, 2001 did not just result in the deaths of 2,250 people, it also resulted in nearly \$80 billion in economic damage with about \$32.5 billion covered by nearly 150 domestic and international insurers and reinsurers. In the wake of the attacks, commercial insurance insurers began excluding terrorism coverage from policies provided to businesses across the country.

In response, Congress enacted the Terrorism Risk Insurance Act of 2002 to increase the availability of terrorism risk insurance to at-risk American businesses by guaranteeing that the Government would share some of the losses with private insurers should a terrorist attack occur. Initially authorized for 3 years, the program was refined and extended in 2005 and 2007. It is scheduled to sunset in 2014.

I have introduced the "Fostering Resilience to Terrorism Act of 2013," which extends the TRIA program 10 years, creating much-needed stability and predictability for the business community. Finally, another evaluation should be of community en-

gagement and involvement. Canadian authorities gave credit to the Canadian Muslim community for recognizing and identifying the behavior of the alleged perpetrators and reporting this information to the authorities.

Last Congress, this committee held a series of hearings that stroked a climate of fear and distrust in the Muslim community. Those hearings also served as propaganda for fear and distrust of the Muslim community. In the wake of the Boston Marathon bombings, attempts were made to revive this climate of fear and distrust. Some said that we must surveil the Muslim community.

Luckily, this committee served as a platform to counter the arguments that were perpetuated last Congress. The Boston Police Chief testified that there is no need to live in a surveillance state and a former FBI special agent in charge testified that community involvement is what is necessary to recognize the signs of radicalization and prevent attacks. These are just a few things that we can evaluate in this hearing and beyond. I look forward to today's testimony.

Mr. KING. We are very pleased to have a distinct panel of witnesses for us today, Dr. Seth Jones, Mr. Robin Simcox, Mr. Tom Joscelyn, Mr. Barack Barfi.

Our first witness, Dr. Seth Jones, is the associate director of the International Security and Defense Policy Center at the RAND Corporation as well as an adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins University School for Advanced International Studies.

Previously, Dr. Jones served as the representative for the Commander U.S. Special Operations Command to the Assistant Secretary of Defense of Special Operations. Prior to that position, he served as a plans officer and advisor to the Commanding General U.S. Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan.

Dr. Jones specializes in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism including a focus on Afghanistan, Pakistan, and al-Qaeda. He has been a source of information and advice to this committee and we are pleased to welcome him back for this session as well.

Dr. Jones.

**STATEMENT OF SETH G. JONES, PH.D., ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR,
INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AND DEFENSE POLICY CENTER**

Mr. JONES. Thank you very much, Chairman King, Ranking Member Higgins, and Members of the subcommittee. Thanks for inviting us on this very important subject.

I am going to focus my remarks predominantly on the Syria front because I consider that blinking red right now, though I had written and have a number of comments later on the Iran component.

In my view with the escalating war in Syria presents a growing threat to the United States led by Jabhat al-Nusrah, which is an al-Qaeda-affiliated group and we will touch on that shortly.

Syria is becoming a training ground for foreign fighters. As Chairman King mentioned, for the past year, particularly concerning, an increasing number of fighters have traveled to Syria from other locations including the West particularly in Europe to fight against the Assad regime where some have joined Jabhat al-Nusrah.

Most Westerners appear to be Europeans from such countries as Belgium, France, and Sweden. There are many others that the Chairman mentioned as well.

Many of these fighters are gaining valuable experience in combat, in bomb making, in propaganda, in counterintelligence. Most are expanding their relationships with other jihadist networks op-

erating in other regions and are likely becoming more ideologically committed to the cause.

In addition, this European pipeline is used to transport money, material, and other things to the Syrian front. While in my judgment the number of American citizens at the moment traveling to Syria appears to be limited at least in comparison to the number of Europeans and others, the increase in Europeans with potential access to the United States does present a serious counterterrorism challenge.

I would say it is unclear at the moment whether most of these fighters will remain in the long run in Syria, whether they will move to other war zones, or whether they will return home.

Even if some return home as we have seen with groups like al-Shabaab it is uncertain whether they will become involved in plots, recruiting, and fundraising, or become disillusioned.

I would say the trend is fairly straightforward and that is that Syria is attracting a growing cadre of foreign fighters including from the West who could potentially return home with the capability and the intentions to conduct attacks or be involved in other terrorist activity in the United States.

The rest of my remarks will focus on three issues. The first is Jabhat al-Nusrah, the second is its capabilities, and the third is what that means for the homeland.

Let me just briefly mention that it is clear—it is very important in my view to recognize that Jabhat al-Nusrah or the al-Nusrah front group out of al-Qaeda and Iraq's logistics and support network in Syria in late 2011.

When it was created al-Qaeda and Iraq utilized these established networks to create Jabhat al-Nusrah has an operational arm. They were much more careful than they have been in other places to make this not overtly publicized that relationship so in some cases created confusion on people covering the Syrian war that maybe the connections weren't as strong.

I would say at least as I have looked at it, that the organization was created out of, generally out of al-Qaeda in Iraq. Its goal fits al-Qaeda's model. It is to establish an emirate in Syria and potentially the broader region.

I would say one thing very briefly on the trends. After the April 2013 strain between Jabhat al-Nusrah and al-Qaeda in Iraq what appears to be a very concerning development is Jabhat al-Nusrah's increasing close relationship with al-Qaeda's central leadership in Pakistan.

Meaning that should be a very serious concern for the United States if we are seeing a dialogue go back to Ayman al-Zawahiri's central leadership. That has grave implications, I think, for the United States.

I do think, second on the capabilities; again we are seeing a fairly robust command-and-control network. I think it is worth noting that al-Nusrah has been involved in over-running multiple bases in Syria that are—in gathering extensive firepower including heavy artillery, heavy weapons, and aircraft.

Then finally, on threats to the West, let me just say briefly that I would say at the moment, Jabhat al-Nusrah does appear to be predominately interested in overthrowing the Assad regime and

possibly launching attacks against Israel, but it is possible that these intentions could change.

I think it is critical for the United States to keep a very close watch with its allies including both in Europe and the region on these individuals getting them on a watch list because with potential access to Europe, they have got potential access through the visa waiver program to the United States.

This is a very serious concern. I think in the long run, the threat to the United States from Syria will only increase and so we better deal with this now, and we can talk again about the substance of that later.

I will conclude my remarks again by thanking you Chairman King and Ranking Member Higgins and the rest of the committee for this opportunity. I look forward to the questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Jones follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF SETH G. JONES ¹

MAY 22, 2013

THE TERRORIST THREAT FROM SYRIA ²

Chairman King, Ranking Member Higgins, and Members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to appear before you today on this important topic.

The escalating war in Syria presents a growing threat to the United States. Led by Jabhat al-Nusrah (the Victory Front), an al-Qaeda-affiliated group, Syria is becoming a consummate training ground for foreign fighters. Over the past year, an increasing number of fighters have traveled to Syria from other areas—including the West—to fight against the Assad regime, where some have joined Jabhat al-Nusrah. Most Westerners appear to be Europeans from such countries as Belgium, France, and Sweden. Many of these fighters are gaining valuable experience in combat, bomb making, propaganda, and counterintelligence. Most are also expanding their relationships with fighters from other regions—such as the Persian Gulf, North Africa, and South Asia—and becoming more ideologically committed. In addition, this European pipeline is used to transport money and material to the Syrian front.

While the number of American citizens traveling to Syria appears to be limited, at least at the moment, the increase in Europeans with potential access to the United States presents a serious counterterrorism challenge. It is currently unclear whether most of these fighters will remain in Syria over the long run, move to other war zones such as North Africa, or return home. And even if some return to the West, it is uncertain whether these fighters will become involved in terrorist plots, focus on recruiting and fundraising, or become disillusioned with terrorism. Still, the trend is clear: Syria is attracting a growing cadre of foreign fighters from the West, who could potentially return home with the capability to conduct attacks against the United States and its allies.

The information for this testimony was gathered from a range of sources, including jihadist websites and forums, Western websites that publish jihadist videos and transcripts (such as SITE Intelligence Group and the *Long War Journal*), interviews with government officials from the West and the Middle East, and secondary sources. Yet there are notable gaps in this analysis, as there are in most assessments of the Syrian war. It is uncertain, for instance, how many foreign fighters from the West and other areas have traveled to Syria, why and how they have radicalized, and what they will do if they leave. Despite these methodological chal-

¹The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of RAND or any of the sponsors of its research. This product is part of the RAND Corporation testimony series. RAND testimonies record testimony presented by RAND associates to Federal, State, or local legislative committees; Government-appointed commissions and panels; and private review and oversight bodies. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

²This testimony is available for free download at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT388.html>.

lenges, there is still sufficient information to assess the threat from Syria with reasonable accuracy.

This testimony is divided into three sections. The first outlines the origins of Jabhat al-Nusra and its evolution since 2011. The second section assesses Jabhat al-Nusra's growing capabilities and presence in Syria, as well as briefly describes other militant groups operating in Syria. The third examines the threat to the U.S. homeland and U.S. allies from Syria.

THE ORIGINS OF AL-QAEDA IN SYRIA

Jabhat al-Nusra grew out of al-Qaeda in Iraq's logistics and support network in Syria. Beginning as early as 2003, Syria became a key transit point for foreigners that wanted to fight in Iraq. According to documents captured in a raid near Sinjar, Iraq, for instance, foreign fighters in Iraq came from such countries as Saudi Arabia, Libya, Yemen, Algeria, and Syria. Most were young, averaging 24 to 25 years old. Some had been students, while others held full-time jobs.³ Virtually all of the foreign fighters entered Iraq through Syria with the aid of smuggling and criminal networks.⁴ In short, Syria became a significant transit hub for al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups.

As the war in Syria began to intensify in 2011, al-Qaeda in Iraq leaders utilized these established networks and created Jabhat al-Nusra as their operational arm in Syria. Al-Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (also known as Abu Du'a) explained that "we laid for them plans, and drew up for them the policy of work, and gave them what financial support we could every month, and supplied them with men who had known the battlefields of jihad, from the emigrants and the natives."⁵ Al-Qaeda in Iraq officials chose Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, an Iraqi national, as leader (or emir). Jawlani pledged allegiance to Baghdadi before taking charge of operations in Syria in late 2011. Al-Qaeda in Iraq then sent small arms and light weapons—including rifles, light machine guns, and rocket-propelled grenades—to its Syrian contingent. It also sent explosives experts to augment Jabhat al-Nusra's bomb-making capabilities and deployed fighters to boost its ranks. A growing number of donors from the Persian Gulf and Levant began to send financial support.⁶

Jabhat al-Nusra leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani explained that the group's goal is to bring "back the rule of God's law on earth."⁷ It is a Salafi-jihadist group committed to establishing an Islamic emirate in Syria and potentially the broader region. Its leaders have established a radical interpretation of sharia, or Islamic law, in some areas they control in Syria. In an important development, however, al-Qaeda leaders initially decided not to publicize the group's links with al-Qaeda in Iraq, perhaps out of concern that it would undermine their support in Syria and draw unwelcome attention from U.S. and other foreign intelligence agencies.

Syria has long been important to al-Qaeda for historical, religious, and strategic reasons. Known as Bilad al-Sham, or the Land of the Levantine Peoples, Damascus was the base for the thirteenth century scholar Ibn Taymiyyah, whose book, *The Religious and Moral Concept of Jihad*, is a pillar of al-Qaeda's ideology.⁸ The wider Levant region also includes al-Quds, or Jerusalem, Islam's third-holiest site after Mecca and Medina. In addition, Syria is strategically important because it borders two of al-Qaeda's most hated enemies, Israel and Jordan, and the Assad government's conventional and unconventional weapons caches may become increasingly available as the Assad regime loses control of territory.⁹

By early 2013, however, Jabhat al-Nusra's relationship with al-Qaeda in Iraq became strained, pushing Jabhat al-Nusra closer to al-Qaeda's senior leadership in Pakistan. Jabhat al-Nusra officials were apparently unhappy when al-Qaeda in Iraq announced in April 2013 their intention to merge the al-Qaeda's affiliates in Iraq and Syria under a common name, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. As Jabhat al-Nusra established its own sources of funding, fighters, and material, it became increasingly independent from al-Qaeda in Iraq. A formal merger would

³ Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Al-Qaeda's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point, NY: Harmony Project, Combating Terrorism Center, 2007).

⁴ Brian Fishman, ed., *Bombers, Bank Accounts, and Bleedout: Al-Qaeda's Road In and Out of Iraq* (West Point, NY: Harmony Project, Combating Terrorism Center, 2008), pp. 50, 70.

⁵ Audio Statement by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, SITE Intelligence Group, April 10, 2013.

⁶ Author interview with government officials from Europe and the Middle East, April and May 2013.

⁷ Video Statement by Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, January 24, 2012.

⁸ Shaykh ul-Islam Taqi-ud-Deen Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah, *The Religious and Moral Doctrine of Jihad* (Birmingham, England: Maktabah al-Ansaar Publications, 2001).

⁹ The author thanks Bruce Hoffman for making these points.

likely have undermined this autonomy. Asserting his independence from al-Qaeda in Iraq, Jawlani declared his loyalty directly to al-Qaeda's central leadership in Pakistan. "This is a pledge of allegiance from the sons of the al Nusrah Front and their supervisor general that we renew to the Sheikh of Jihad, Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri, may Allah preserve him," Jawlani announced in April.¹⁰ As discussed later in the testimony, Jabhat al-Nusrah's move toward al-Qaeda's central leadership in Pakistan makes it a more dangerous enemy to the United States.

Understanding the origins of Jabhat al-Nusrah is important for two reasons. First, al-Qaeda in Iraq operatives helped establish the group, directly linking it to al-Qaeda. Unlike with other affiliates, such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, Syrian operatives publicly downplayed their ties with al-Qaeda. This was an important strategic decision and one that al-Qa'ida-linked groups may increasingly do in the future to avoid unwanted monitoring from foreign governments. Second, this relationship gave Jabhat al-Nusrah access to money, weapons, fighters, and other material from al-Qaeda in Iraq.

GROWING CAPABILITIES

Since early 2012, Jabhat al-Nusrah has developed a robust command-and-control network across Syria, conducted a devastating string of suicide attacks, and orchestrated hundreds of car bombs and assassinations against the Assad regime. Between November 2011 and December 2012, for instance, it was involved in nearly 600 attacks in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Idlib, and other locations.¹¹ It has claimed credit for many of its attacks in announcements released on jihadist forums and its Twitter site. Indeed, Jabhat al-Nusrah has established an advanced propaganda campaign led by its official media arm, the White Minaret Group.

To organize its operations, Jabhat al-Nusrah appointed a management council, set up a headquarters, and created regional networks with military and religious leaders to run operations, manage cross-border facilitation, and procure weapons and other supplies. In addition, it has amassed an impressive arsenal of weapons, making it one of al-Qaeda's best-armed affiliates in the world. It has participated with other groups in seizing control of several Syrian military bases and acquired a vast array of armaments to enhance its firepower and endow it with capabilities more akin to a small army than a rag-tag group of guerrilla fighters. In February 2013, for example, Jabhat al-Nusrah fighters helped seize control of the al-Jarrah airbase in Thawra, as well as two dams in Raqqa. In January, Jabhat al-Nusrah and Ahrar al-Sham teamed up with the Islamic Vanguard to seize control of Taftanaz, a key Syrian air force base in Idlib. In December 2012, Jabhat al-Nusrah and allied groups took control of the Sheikh Suleiman base. In October, Jabhat al-Nusrah and allied fighters overran a Syrian air defense and Scud missile base in Aleppo.¹²

As Figure 1 highlights, Jabhat al-Nusrah has been active in several areas of Syria. Its most secure sanctuary is likely in the Sunni-dominated Dayr az-Zawr province, where al-Qaeda in Iraq's foreign fighter pipeline operated for nearly a decade. A second area is in northwestern Syria, where Jabhat al-Nusrah has moved fighters, explosives, and other material across the Turkish border into its sanctuaries in Halab and Idlib provinces. Reminiscent of groups like Hezbollah, Jabhat al-Nusrah has set up some humanitarian relief efforts in these provinces, along with religious courts and schools. Jabhat al-Nusrah has also established a sanctuary in southwestern Syria in Dar'a province, near the Jordanian border, as well as in Damascus.¹³

¹⁰ Audio Statement by Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, SITE Intelligence Group, April 10, 2013. On the broader debate, also see Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Nusrah Front Leader Renews Allegiance to al Qaeda, Rejects New Name," *Long War Journal*, April 10, 2013.

¹¹ U.S. Department of State, *Terrorist Designations of the al-Nusrah Front as an Alias for al-Qa'ida in Iraq* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, December 2012).

¹² See, for example, Bill Roggio, "'Islamist' Factions Seize Syrian Airbase," *Long War Journal*, February 12, 2013.

¹³ Author interview with government officials from Europe and the Middle East, April and May 2013.

Figure 1: Areas of Jabhat al-Nusrah Activity



While Jabhat al-Nusrah is one of the most capable extremist groups in Syria, it is not the only one. It has conducted joint operations with over a dozen groups, such as Ahrar al-Sham, Suqur al-Sham, and Martyrs of Syria. Ahrar al-Sham is perhaps the largest Salafi-jihadist group operating in Syria.¹⁴ In 2012, Jabhat al-Nusrah cooperated with at least nine other groups to create the Mujahideen Shura Council in Dayr az-Zawr. The council was formed to “unite the ranks of the jihadi brigades in the Cause of Allah, organize the efforts and the attacks against the soldiers of disbelief and apostasy, and distinguish the ranks of truth from falsehood,” according to a statement released by the group in December 2012. “We call upon our sincere mujahideen brothers all over the strong Levant to unite their ranks in groups, pure of the filth of suspicious groups and the infiltration of people who have no qualities or faith, in order to clarify their banner and purify their path.”¹⁵ Al-Qaeda in Iraq pursued a similar strategy, forming a Mujahideen Shura Council in 2006 to coordinate operations among Sunni militant groups in Iraq.

THREATS TO THE WEST

At the moment, Jabhat al-Nusrah and its leaders, including Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, appear to be most interested in overthrowing the Assad regime and possibly launching attacks against Israel. But it is conceivable that Jawlani’s intentions will evolve and Jabhat al-Nusrah or splinter groups could conduct attacks in the West after—or even before—the Assad regime falls. Jabhat al-Nusrah’s access to foreign fighters, external network in Europe and other areas, and bomb-making expertise suggest that it may have the capability to plan and support attacks against the West.

More broadly, there appears to be a growing contingent of foreign fighters traveling to—and from—Syria to fight in the war. A substantial portion of these fighters are coming from the region, including Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. But a significant number also appear to be coming from the West, especially from Belgium, France, and Sweden. Extremists have traveled to Syria from other European coun-

¹⁴ On Syrian opposition groups see Elizabeth O’Bagy, *Jihad in Syria* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, September 2012); Aron Lund, *Syrian Jihadism* (Uppsala, Sweden: Swedish Institute of International Affairs, September 2012).

¹⁵ Bill Roggio, “Al Nusrah Front Poised to Take Over Last Major City on Euphrates River,” *The Long War Journal*, March 13, 2013.

tries. According to Spanish officials, for example, a network based in Spain and Morocco sent approximately two dozen fighters to Jabhat al-Nusrah over the past year. It is unclear how many of these fighters have returned to the West, but some have apparently returned to Germany, Denmark, Spain, and Norway among others. In October 2012, authorities in Kosovo arrested the extremist Shurki Aliu, who had traveled from Syria to Kosovo and was involved in recruiting and providing material to Syrian opposition groups. A small number of Americans—perhaps less than a dozen—have apparently traveled to Syria to fight with the Syrian opposition.¹⁶

While Turkey is the most common transit country through which extremist foreign fighters travel before entering Syria, some use Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. As Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari acknowledged, “We have solid information and intelligence that member of al-Qaeda terrorist networks have gone in the other direction, to Syria, to help, to carry out attacks.”¹⁷ There are also indications that some al-Qaeda members have left Pakistan and traveled to Syria, including former al-Qaeda senior leader Abu Wafa al-Saudi.

These trends pose a threat to the United States. Syria is attracting a growing cadre of foreign fighters from the West, who could potentially return with the capability to conduct attacks against the United States and its allies. Some of these individuals have joined Jabhat al-Nusrah, which has developed a closer relationship with al-Qaeda’s senior leaders in Pakistan. Just as concerning, some Free Syrian Army leaders have praised Jabhat al-Nusrah. Colonel Riyadh al-Assad, a founder of the Free Syrian Army, defended Jabhat al-Nusrah as “our brothers in Islam.” He continued that they “might have some ideological thoughts over which we differ, but the majority of the people are looking with admiration toward the al Nusrah Front.”¹⁸ And Ahmed Moaz al-Khatib, head of the Syrian Opposition Coalition, similarly remarked that the U.S. decision in December 2012 to designate Jabhat al-Nusrah as a terrorist organization “must be reexamined” since they shared “the same goal: to overthrow the criminal regime” of President Bashar al-Assad.¹⁹ This defense of Jabhat al-Nusrah is a short-term deal with the devil. Al-Qaeda’s long-term vision of establishing a radical Islamic emirate in the Levant—and, indeed further afield wherever it can—is incompatible with the more moderate religious views of most Syrians.

While the number of American citizens traveling to Syria appears to be limited, at least at the moment, the increase in Europeans with potential access to the United States—including through the Visa Waiver Program—presents a serious counterterrorism challenge. It is incumbent on the United States and its European allies to continue to identify the names of these foreign fighters (including variations in spelling and cover names), share intelligence, ensure they are on appropriate watch lists, monitor their activities, and capture them if they return to the West. As suggested by the recent Boston bombers and several previous terrorists in the United States (such as Faisal Shahzad and Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab), not all radicalized individuals flying into the United States make it onto watch lists. U.S. and European intelligence on Syrian extremists is currently spotty, making it important to increase human and signals intelligence collection capabilities over the next year to track individuals traveling into—and out of—Syria.

In the long run, the threat to the United States from Syria will likely increase. Even if the Assad regime is overthrown, the war will almost certainly continue in a different form, as sub-state groups like Jabhat al-Nusrah compete for control of the state and attempt to spread their ideology across the region.

Again, thank you for allowing me to appear before you today, and I’d be happy to take your questions.

Mr. KING. Thank you very much, Dr. Jones.

Mr. Robin Simcox is a research fellow at the Henry Jackson Society in London, a bipartisan British-based think tank. I have had up privilege of attending Henry Jackson Society meetings in this country and again, an outstanding organization.

¹⁶ Author interview with government officials from Europe and the Middle East, April and May 2013.

¹⁷ “Iraq Says al-Qaeda Flowing Into Syria,” *Al Jazeera*, July 5, 2012.

¹⁸ Riyadh made the comments in an undated YouTube video. See, for example, Bill Roggio, “Free Syrian Army Commander Praises Al Nusrah Front as ‘Brothers,’” *Long War Journal*, March 30, 2013.

¹⁹ “Syrian Opposition Urges U.S. to Reconsider Al-Nusrah Move,” *Hurriyet Daily News* (Turkey), December 12, 2012.

Mr. Simcox's work focuses on terrorism and National security, specifically al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda-inspired affiliates, and terrorism trends. He is also the author of "Al Qaeda in the U.S.: A Complete Analysis of Terrorism Offenses" and prior to joining the Henry Jackson Society, Mr. Simcox was a research fellow at the Center for Social Cohesion, a think tank studying extremism and terrorism in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Simcox we welcome you here today, and look forward to your testimony. Thank you.

**STATEMENT OF ROBIN SIMCOX, RESEARCH FELLOW, THE
HENRY JACKSON SOCIETY**

Mr. SIMCOX. Chairman King, Ranking Member Higgins, Members of the subcommittee, thank you very much for inviting me today to discuss this issue, which I think is of extreme relevance.

The first thing I want to point out is that even though the numbers of Western European fighters currently in Syria may be relatively small, the impact they can have both in the region and on the U.S. homeland is significant.

Now currently, there has not been any successful attacks in the United States that have taken place as a result of someone coming back from Syria, but there is evidence of plotting in other countries that I think should concern us greatly.

Just last week, the Belgian security services intercepted a telephone call between an extremist based in Syria and one of his contacts back in Belgium which discuss the potential attack on the Brussels Palace of Justice.

Back in October, there was a Jordanian plot that was disrupted that would have been potentially catastrophic. Individuals who had fought together in Syria and forged ties during that time of fighting jihad together in Syria were planning a series of attacks that would have included an attack on the U.S. Embassy in Amman.

These individuals were an affiliate with al-Qaeda in Iraq and I believe it is absolutely impossible to understand what is going on in Syria and the threat that it poses without understanding al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Abu Dua who is the amir of that group is now been suggested as even move into northern parts of Syria to solidify al-Qaeda in Iraq's control over operations in Syria itself.

Obviously, another country which has a significant stake in Syria is Iran. The engagement and interaction between themselves and al-Qaeda I think is established. All I would say is that I think we shouldn't see it is necessarily a done deal that these two are going to work together completely harmoniously in the future.

I don't believe they are especially natural allies and this plays itself out geopolitically at times. So you have Iran attempting to prop up Assad in Syria at the same time as al-Qaeda are trying to overthrow him.

You have al-Qaeda and Iraq who viscerally hate the Shi'i, target them consistently in regard the current Iraqi government as almost an Iranian branch or defacto Iranian government.

Zawahiri has spoken on occasion of Iran not as an ally but as a potential strategic threat and so while the interaction is there, I

think there are still opportunities for the United States to be able to divide them as well.

I think in terms of Syrians—the Syrian conflict and members coming back to plot attacks in the United States and the West generally, I think we should be absolutely mindful of that.

But there is one caveat I would like to add in my remarks today. My reports recently—I have written three reports on terrorism trends in the United Kingdom and the United States and a statistical analysis of the background of all individuals who have either been convicted in U.K. or U.S. courts or committed suicide attacks here.

The vast majority of those who plot serious terrorist attacks against the West are those that have received training in foreign countries in Pakistan, Afghanistan, those sorts of places, but have then been dispatched back for a very specific operation in mind.

Actually those that have combat experience in Kashmir, Chechnya, Bosnia, and the sorts of places weren't always the ones that were most likely to then come back and carry out terrorist attacks. Now obviously there is no guarantee that that is going to be the case in the future, but I just think it is something that is worth bearing in mind.

I also think it is worth bearing in mind that the U.S.A.'s—the intervention or failure to intervene is going to be just as much a policy in this as intervention.

Iraq is sometimes seen for example as having a radicalizing effect on Muslim communities yet Bosnia a war where the United States was much more reluctant to be involved was used by ideologues as proof that the West didn't care about the slaughter of Muslims taken place, in fact it acquiesced in it.

So essentially, America is to deal with the fall-out from Syria and no matter its policies in the future and no matter how it decides to deal with this problem of Syrian jihadists returning.

So I will wrap up there.

Thank you again for hearing my thoughts on this today and I will be delighted to answer the questions you have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Simcox follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF ROBIN SIMCOX

22ND MAY 2013

Chairman King, Members of the subcommittee, my sincere thanks for the opportunity to testify here today on issues which I believe should concern us all more and more. That concern should be shared not just by those who live in America, but by non-American citizens who care about America's security.

SYRIA AND THE REGION

The on-going conflict in Syria is quite rightly of significant concern to the international community. This is not just because tens of thousands have now died—but because of the presence of significant amount of jihadist militants, including members of al-Qaeda.

The al-Qaeda group currently operating in Syria is called Jabhat al-Nusra, which controls parts of eastern Syria and has carried out a string of suicide bombings.

Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani, Jabhat al-Nusra's leader, last month pledged allegiance to the emir of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri.

It is estimated that the number of Western fighters operating in Syria is in the low- to mid-hundreds. Despite these relatively small numbers, there are a multitude of reasons to be concerned about the potential fallout from Syria—not just in the region, but how it could impact the U.S. homeland.

At present there have not been any attempted attacks on the United States by those who have fought in Syria. However, there is now evidence of other countries being targeted by those who have.

The first is Belgium. Last week, it was reported that their security services intercepted a call from an extremist based in Syria, who was discussing a potential attack on the Brussels Palace of Justice with a contact in Belgium.

Going further back, it was reported in October of last year that Jordanian authorities disrupted a significant plot against civilian and government targets, including potentially the U.S. Embassy in Amman.

The Jordanian cell that connected in Syria was only thought to have been acquaintances prior to their shared experience fighting there. Afterwards, they had access to huge amounts of weaponry and explosives, as well as combat experience and a shared ideological inspiration to attack a foreign country.

The Jordanian individuals in this plot were connected to al-Qaeda's affiliate in Iraq, and I believe it is impossible to consider the threat emanating from this region without considering what is happening in Iraq.

The State Department has now designated Jabhat al-Nusra as an alias for al-Qaeda in Iraq. Abu Dua, the emir of that group, announced last month that Jabhat al-Nusra was simply a "branch" of al-Qaeda in Iraq. It has been reported in recent days that Abu Dua has now entered northern Syria in order to get an even stronger grip on al-Qaeda's operations there.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq provides funding to Jabhat al-Nusra, as well as sharing fighters and the joint aspiration to overthrow Bashar al-Assad. However, the relationship between the two groups is not entirely straightforward. Al-Jawlani has distanced himself from Abu Dua's claim of Jabhat al-Nusra simply being an extension of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Furthermore, al-Jawlani's pledge of allegiance to al-Zawahiri does not necessarily make Jabhat al-Nusra a formal part of the al-Qaeda network. For example, members of al-Shabaab in Somalia pledged loyalty to al-Qaeda's emir—at that stage Osama bin Laden—2½ years before they were officially accepted by al-Qaeda as a formal franchise.

IRAN

The conflict in Syria contains significant influence from Iran, one of the biggest supporters of the Assad regime.

Iranian links to al-Qaeda have come under review following last month's foiled train attack in Canada, and the suggestion that the two plotters were being guided by al-Qaeda elements in Iran.

It would be surprising if the Canadian plot was Iranian government-sanctioned. Al-Qaeda would not be willing to be used as a proxy by the Iranian government in the way that, for example, Hizbollah would. There is too much distrust on both sides. I believe it is more likely that Iran were either not aware of al-Qaeda's activities with regards to the Canadian plot, or they were and simply chose to look the other way.

There is some truth in the suggestion that Iran's connections to al-Qaeda are often largely overlooked. The Shia-Sunni sectarian split is seen as making any collaboration between the two a non-starter. However, there is evidence of engagement on some level.

For example, Osama bin Laden met with Imad Mughniyah, a senior member of Hizbollah, in the early 1990s. It is thought that al-Qaeda subsequently received explosives training from the group. Furthermore, Iran facilitated al-Qaeda members' travel in and out of Afghanistan prior to 9/11. Senior al-Qaeda leaders close to Osama bin Laden fled there after the invasion of Afghanistan, before being placed under a form of house arrest by early 2002.

There is the possibility that Iran envisaged using some of these al-Qaeda operatives as a bargaining chip with the United States, or as a deterrent against attack on Iranian soil.

Iran and al-Qaeda do also have shared enemies—the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia being the obvious ones. Therefore it is at least conceivable that Iran would allow al-Qaeda's operatives limited scope to undertake activities against their shared enemies in return for not targeting Iran itself.

While many of the al-Qaeda operatives in Iran have now been released, it is certain that there is still an al-Qaeda presence there.

However, I believe this potential for interaction should not distract us from the potentially significant differences that do still exist between the two. These differences have on occasion played themselves out geopolitically.

In Syria, Iran is supporting Assad at a time al-Qaeda are attempting to overthrow him. Al-Zawahiri has publicly lambasted Iran's role in the conflict. The perception of an increasingly influential Iran is something that al-Zawahiri has been warning of for several years. Al-Zawahiri has also at times portrayed Iran as a strategic threat, rather than an ally.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq has a visceral hatred for Iran, which it regards as being a de facto ruler of the current Iraqi government.

Therefore, despite the interaction that certainly does exist between the two, there are still question marks concerning the precise nature of the relationship between al-Qaeda and Iran.

However, there are also differences between franchises within al-Qaeda itself.

The complex dynamics between al-Qaeda in Iraq and Jabhat al-Nusra mirrors a wider ambiguity as to the precise dynamics between al-Qaeda's senior leadership and its affiliates.

For example, in the documentation discovered at Abbottabad, the revulsion that members of al-Qaeda's core feel for their Iraqi franchise is clear, with suggestions that there is little operational interaction between the two.

This is evidence of not only the increased importance of localised autonomy within the al-Qaeda movement today, but also the increased decentralisation of its leadership structure.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, let me address some of what should be key concerns for homeland security. In the short term: The impact of Western fighters returning from Syria. In the long term: The fallout from a perceived lack of involvement by the West.

I have in recent years co-authored three reports on terrorism trends from the late 1990s onwards. This includes two editions of a publication called *Islamist Terrorism: The British Connections*, and most recently a publication called *Al-Qaeda in the United States: A Complete Analysis of Terrorism Offenses*. These reports provide a statistical analysis of the background of all individuals who were convicted in the United States and United Kingdom for Islamism or al-Qaeda-related offenses, or who had committed suicide attacks there.

As part of this most recent research I studied which of those who had fought in conflict zones abroad—for example in Chechnya, Bosnia, or Kashmir—then went on to attempt mass casualty terrorist attacks after leaving the battlefield.

Those that have attacked, or tried to attack, the West tended to be cells who had received terrorist training abroad and then returned to their country of origin specifically to carry out an operation.

In both the United Kingdom and United States, it was extremely rare for those with combat experience to try and launch domestic attacks once they returned home.

This may seem like a glimmer of a silver lining, but it is worth stressing that there is no guarantee that this will remain the case.

The war in Syria could have other knock-on effects. For example, as with the jihad of the 1980s and 1990s, Syria will give legitimacy to a new generation of fighters. Those who have fought there could go on to become key ideologues, with their experiences in Syria serving as an inspiration for future generations of aspiring militants. This is precisely what happened with conflicts such as those in Afghanistan and Kashmir, and there is no reason to think Syria will be different.

Furthermore, it is worth remembering that inaction can have just as much impact as intervention. It is often assumed that U.S. intervention in Iraq had a radicalising effect on Muslim communities. Yet consider the radicalising impact of a less-discussed war: That in Bosnia. The West had considerably less involvement in Bosnia than it did in Iraq and yet, in Europe, ideologues attempted to persuade Muslim communities that Western inaction meant Western acquiescence in the slaughter of Bosnian Muslims.

Therefore, there remains a host of things to concern us about the fallout from Syria in both the short and long term. Thank you all for listening to my thoughts on this today, and I would be delighted to answer any questions you may have.

Mr. KING. Thank you Mr. Simcox.

I would just mentioned that Chairman McCaul and I jointly attended in the Henry Jackson Society and both of us were extremely impressed by your work.

The society in general, but your work in particular, particularly that volume you put together, which I have to admit, I am still

working my way through. If anyone wants to see a detailed compilation, well you did it. So, thank you.

Mr. SIMCOX. Thank you.

Mr. Tom Joscelyn is a senior fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, a nonpartisan institution focused on National security and foreign policy, which was founded shortly after the September 11, 2011 terrorist attacks. He is also the senior editor of the *Long War Journal*.

Mr. Joscelyn is a terrorism analyst and writer whose research focuses on how al-Qaeda and its affiliates operate around the world.

Mr. Joscelyn served as senior terrorism advisor for Mayor Giuliani's 2008 presidential campaign, and in 2006 he was named one of Claremont Institute's Lincoln Fellows.

He also has been extremely helpful to this committee, has testified before, and Mr. Joscelyn, welcome you back again today. Thank you.

**STATEMENT OF THOMAS JOSCELYN, SENIOR FELLOW,
FOUNDATION FOR THE DEFENSE OF DEMOCRACIES**

Mr. JOSCELYN. Well, thank you for having me back, Congressman King and Ranking Member Higgins and other Members of the subcommittee.

I am going to focus my comments mainly on al-Qaeda and Iran because this is really I think a pretty widely misunderstood topic. I think both of your comments were right on the money in terms of emphasizing that there are numerous areas where they have divergent interests—

Mr. KING. If I could interrupt for just one second to say that that was certainly the main concern of Ranking Member Higgins when he came to me with this whole new element of Iran. So you in particular, we will be looking forward to your testimony.

Mr. JOSCELYN. Sure, sure. Let me give you a little bit of a historical perspective first because I think in order to understand how al-Qaeda and Iran collude together despite their differences, you have to take a longer view. I am going to get to the more recent plots, but you have to take a longer view.

Going back to the early 1990s, and this is all documented in the 9/11 Commission report—actually pages 60 to 61, 128, and 240 to 241—where they discuss in detail how al-Qaeda and Iran actually forged an agreement to collude against their common enemies. Okay?

This first agreement was actually forged in late 1992 or 1993 when al-Qaeda was stationed in the Sudan at the time. It had numerous ramifications for how al-Qaeda evolved.

In fact, part of the agreement led to senior al-Qaeda operatives traveling—this is again, according to the 9/11 Commission—traveling to both Lebanon and Iran to receive explosives training which was then used in the 1998 embassy bombings. Okay? So this is a matter of historical record.

I would say in addition to the 9/11 Commission report when I look at the long view of the relationship other building blocks I look to—towards are actually the trial transcripts that came out of the embassy bombing trial in the spring of 2001 in New York, other documents were produced in the course of that litigation, I look

back to the Clinton administration's original indictment of al-Qaeda November 4, 1998.

I look back to the CIA's documents that have been declassified from the 1990s. I look to the FBI's declassified documents of 1990s. In other words what I am trying to say here is for the subcommittee is that there is this voluminous material that you have to look at in order to understand the relationship over a longer horizon and that even though they have had diverging interests and have actually come into conflict at times there are still numerous instances where actually the two have colluded.

So looking at the current state of al-Qaeda and Iran, this is a fascinating part of what we focus on at the *Long War Journal* is a very granule analysis of individual terrorists so we have been trying to track who these guys are in Iran, the senior al-Qaeda leaders in Iran.

Actually the Obama administration's Treasury Department and State Department going back to July 2011, has laid out in very great detail how this relationship works.

I think the Treasury Department and the State Department actually deserve a lot of credit for really blazing the trail in terms of understanding what is going on inside Iran today.

In a series of designations the Treasury Department, which is subjected to a very rigorous process came to the conclusion in July 2011, that in fact al-Qaeda and Iran have an agreement, have an explicit agreement that allows senior al-Qaeda operatives to operate inside Iran.

That designation in July 2011 was followed up with a reward by the State Department in December 2011 of \$10 million for the head of that network, Yasin Al Suri.

It was followed up in February 2012 by designation by the Treasury Department designating Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security for their support to al-Qaeda. Okay, so this is again U.S. Government official position at this point.

Then in October 2012 the Treasury Department came back again and designated the new head of al-Qaeda in Iran in that network and that the new head of al-Qaeda in Iran right now as we sit here is a guy named Muhsin al Fadhli who was a Kuwaiti who actually is so trusted within al-Qaeda he was one of the few terrorists that actually had foreknowledge of the 9/11 attacks. So this is a guy who was a big fish in the al-Qaeda world.

Just quickly going through the plots you will see my testimony would try to do is outline for you, I try to connect the dots between what the Treasury Department and the State Government said about al-Qaeda and Iran is a relationship, the network and how it functions, and actual specific plots that have gone beyond Iraq and Afghanistan.

These are plots that have come at the West and one of the first things I found was the 2010 plot ordered by Osama bin Laden, which was intended to have a Mumbai-style attacks on European cities, actually used the facilitation network in Iran and according to the *New York Times* and other credible reporting, Iran actually provided safe haven to some of the plotters involved in that attack. Okay?

Going forward to the Canadian plot that you have mentioned and expressed concern about—and rightfully so, Congressman—the reporting that has come out says that at least one of those plotters, not only did they receive direction and guidance from al-Qaeda members in Iran, but at least one of them traveled, according to press reporting, to Zahadan, which is in eastern Iran.

Zahadan is actually a hub for al-Qaeda and Iran, as it long has been to al-Qaeda-affiliated groups. It is one of their—basically their transportation nodes that they use to shuttle fighters around. So that sticks out as a red flag to me.

The third thing I would like to say is that earlier this month that Egyptian interior minister came out with news that broke up an al-Qaeda plot against the American Embassy and the French Embassy in Cairo. These embassies in Cairo.

He didn't provide many details about what actually happened in the plot but he identified that at least one of the plotters had trained, received military training in Iran and Pakistan, and he also named a key al-Qaeda point of contact for them as a guy named Dawud al Asadi.

Now being the nerd, this actually struck a chord with me when I saw this because that actually is the alias for the head of al-Qaeda in Iran today. Okay. It is actually Muhsin al Fadhli, one of his key aliases.

So what I am saying here is there is a huge Government literature, U.S. Government literature in the Treasury and State Department outlining this network inside Iran and the focus of my testimony is to show how that network has actually facilitated plots not just in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also abroad in the West and even in our own hemisphere.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Joscelyn follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF THOMAS JOSCELYN

MAY 22, 2013

Chairman King, Ranking Member Higgins, and Members of the committee, thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the threat posed by al-Qaeda's operations inside Iran and Syria. These are complex topics that require a careful evaluation of the facts, and even then there is much we do not know. Yet, it is clear that al-Qaeda's networks in Syria and Iran threaten American interests in various ways.

My testimony can be boiled down to two points. First, al-Qaeda is fighting to establish a safe haven that covers parts of both Iraq and Syria and, if the terror network is successful, it will most likely increase the threat to the U.S. homeland. The effects of al-Qaeda's growth in Syria have already been felt by neighboring countries. And European officials have expressed their concern that al-Qaeda's network inside Syria could be used to launch attacks against their countries.

Second, while Iran's proxies and al-Qaeda are at odds inside Syria, the two have repeatedly colluded since the early 1990s. Under the Obama administration, the Treasury and State Departments have repeatedly highlighted an "agreement" between the Iranian regime and al-Qaeda that allows senior terrorists to operate on Iranian soil.

Al-Qaeda's Iran-based network has not only facilitated the movement of terrorists to the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan, but has also been implicated in plots against the West and against Western interests elsewhere. In my testimony today, I am going to highlight three specific examples: Al-Qaeda's 2010 Mumbai-style plot against European cities, the al-Qaeda plot broken up in Canada in April, and the foiled plot against the U.S. and French Embassies in Cairo earlier this month. In all three instances, there are reported ties between the plotters and al-Qaeda operatives inside Iran. This does not mean that Iranian officials planned these acts

of terror. But the clear implication is that Iran's provision of safe haven has allowed al-Qaeda terrorists to coordinate plots far beyond the Middle East, including just north of our border.

AL-QAEDA IN SYRIA

Al-Qaeda did not start the Syrian rebellion, which comprises a number of groups. My written testimony focuses specifically on al-Qaeda's activities inside Syria. The growth of al-Qaeda's Syrian wing, the Al Nusrah Front, is alarming. Al-Qaeda has clearly capitalized on the violence. Al-Qaeda emir Ayman al Zawahiri has repeatedly emphasized the importance of the effort to topple Bashar al Assad's regime. In February 2012, for instance, Zawahiri urged jihadists to make their way to Syria to fight the "pernicious, cancerous regime."¹ Just a few months earlier, in late 2011, the Al Nusrah Front was established by Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), an al-Qaeda affiliate that has sworn fealty to al-Qaeda's senior leadership.² In April of this year, Abu Muhammad al Julani, the head of the Al Nusrah Front, also reaffirmed his oath of loyalty to Zawahiri in an audio recording.³ Make no mistake about it: The Al Nusrah Front is al-Qaeda.

While the Al Nusrah Front's resources are largely devoted to the fighting inside Syria, we have already witnessed the effects of al-Qaeda's expansion beyond Syria's borders. As the Al Nusrah Front has ramped up its operations, AQI has also increased its operational tempo inside Iraq.⁴ In other words, AQI's operations in Iraq have not suffered even as the group has taken on a larger role inside Syria. This indicates that al-Qaeda's overall capacity for violence has greatly increased inside both countries since late 2011.

Other neighboring states are feeling the effects as well. Consider just one example. Late last year, AQI plotted a complex series of attacks inside Jordan, with the ultimate target being the U.S. Embassy. According to *The Washington Post*, the plotters had fought inside Syria and carried their "new skills and a changed perspective toward their native country" back home with them.⁵ AQI's recruiting and facilitation network inside Jordan plays a significant role in the Al Nusrah Front's operations, making it likely that returnees will continue to pose a threat for the foreseeable future. The Al Nusrah Front poses security challenges for Syria's other neighbors as well. And the Al Nusrah Front's tentacles stretch far beyond Syria's immediate neighborhood. The group is pulling in fighters from numerous other countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa.⁶

European officials have sounded the alarm concerning the Al Nusrah Front's Western recruits. In an interview with *Spiegel Online* in April, German Interior Minister Hans-Peter Friedrich said that authorities were aware "of calls for those Europeans who have been trained in battle" in Syria "to return home and pursue jihad."⁷ Friedrich added, "We are following this development with great concern." Other European officials have expressed similar concerns.

Thus, al-Qaeda's arm in Syria has already impacted the security of neighboring countries and added a new threat to European nations. But we've been asked to assess the threat to the U.S. homeland. While I am not aware of any specific plots against the homeland that have been tied to al-Qaeda's presence in Syria so far, the

¹ Jason Burke, "Al-Qaida leader Zawahiri urges Muslim support for Syrian uprising," *The Guardian*, February 12, 2012. See: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/feb/12/alqaida-zawahiri-support-syrian-uprising>.

² State Department Press Statement, "Terrorist Designations of the al-Nusrah Front as an Alias for al-Qa'ida in Iraq," December 11, 2012. See: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/12/201759.htm>

³ State Department Media Note, "Terrorist Designation of Al-Nusrah Front Leader Muhammad Al-Jawlani," May 16, 2013. See: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/05/209499.htm>. For a discussion of al Julani's statement, see: Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Nusrah Front leader renews allegiance to al-Qaeda, rejects new name," *The Long War Journal*, April 10, 2013. See: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/04/al_nusrah_front_lead.php.

⁴ See, for example: Greg Jaffe, "Iraq attacks raise specter of al-Qaeda's return," *The Washington Post*, July 23, 2012. See: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/iraq-attacks-raise-specter-of-al-qaedas-return/2012/07/23/gJQAVgB74W_story.html.

⁵ Joby Warrick, "In foiled Jordanian terror plot, officials see hand of resurgent al-Qaeda in Iraq," *The Washington Post*, December 2, 2012. See: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-jordanian-terror-plot-officials-see-hand-of-resurgent-al-qaeda-in-iraq/2012/12/02/43f1698c-3421-11e2-bb9b-288a310849ee_story.html.

⁶ The Al Nusrah Front is being assisted by Chechens and others, too. There are even credible reports of jihadists from China traveling to Syria to fight.

⁷ Matthias Gebauer and Veit Medick, "Interior Minister: Boston Points to 'Dangerous Phenomenon'," *Spiegel Online*, April 25, 2013. See: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/german-minister-says-authorities-concerned-about-lone-wolf-terrorists-a-896493-2.html>.

lessons of the past are plain to see. At least three observations concerning the potential threat emanating from Syria come to mind.

First, the 9/11 Commission stressed in its final report that sanctuaries are necessary for large-scale terrorist plotting.⁸ “Many details . . . illustrate the direct and indirect value of the Afghan sanctuary to al-Qaeda in preparing the 9/11 attack and other operations,” the commission found.⁹

It was for this reason that the commission recommended that the U.S. Government craft a strategy for disrupting terrorist sanctuaries. When the commission published its final report in 2004, there was a palpable fear that Iraq would become the next Afghanistan. “If, for example, Iraq becomes a failed state, it will go to the top of the list of places that are breeding grounds for attacks against Americans at home,” the commission wrote.¹⁰ We could make the same observation about Syria (and Iraq) today. Al-Qaeda’s affiliate is attempting to establish a safe haven stretching across both countries. If al-Qaeda is successful, and this is not a certainty at this point, then this will almost certainly lead to new plots against the U.S. homeland.

Second, we have already seen the connection between gains made by al-Qaeda’s affiliates on the ground “over there” and the threat to Americans “over here.”¹¹ The most striking example of this can be found inside Yemen, where al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) made significant advances beginning in 2009. Yet even as AQAP rose in prominence, some counterterrorism analysts assumed that the threat to American interests was confined to inside Yemen. AQAP’s attempted bombing of Flight 253 on Christmas day 2009 changed that thinking. Here is what the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence found in its analysis of the intelligence failures leading up to that attempted attack: “Prior to the 12/25 plot, counterterrorism analysts at NCTC, CIA, and NSA were focused on the threat of terrorist attacks in Yemen, but were not focused on the possibility of AQAP attacks against the U.S. homeland.” The 12/25 plot is just one of several by AQAP against the homeland. We should not make the same analytic mistake with respect to other al-Qaeda affiliates, whether they are in Syria, Iraq, or elsewhere. This does not mean that these affiliates will immediately devote resources to attacks on the U.S. homeland, but the potential is always there.

Third, a violent rebellion inside Syria has already been tied to a catastrophic terrorist attack on the U.S. homeland—albeit indirectly. Consider the following history. One of the paths to 9/11 began in Syria in the early 1980s, when the Assad family’s regime brutally crushed a rebellion launched by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Members of the Brotherhood were forced to flee to neighboring states and Europe. Some of them evolved into elite al-Qaeda operatives.

One such former Syrian Muslim Brother is named Mohammed Zammar, a key recruiter of al-Qaeda’s Hamburg cell, which provided the suicide hijack pilots for the 9/11 operation. One of Zammar’s fellow Syrian Brothers, Mamoun Darkazanli, has been identified as an important backer of the Hamburg cell and served as an imam at the mosque where Mohammed Atta and his fellow hijackers regularly met. Al-Qaeda’s cell in Spain at the time of 9/11 was run by a former Syrian Muslim Brother named Imad Yarkas, who was convicted on terrorism charges. And one of Yarkas’s minions, also a former Syrian Muslim Brother, may have performed surveillance on the World Trade Center in 1997 that was used to plot the 9/11 attack.

Still another former Syrian Brother who rose through al-Qaeda’s ranks is an ideologue named Mustafa Setmariam Nasar (a.k.a. Abu Musab al Suri), who was tied to al-Qaeda’s terrorist plotting inside Europe, including the 2004 Madrid train bombings and the 2005 attacks in London. Nasar played a prominent role in al-Qaeda’s operations prior to being detained in 2005 and transferred to Syrian custody. Nasar is a widely influential jihadist thinker and a key advocate of small-scale terrorist attacks inside the West. He was reportedly freed by the Assad regime in the wake of the current rebellion.¹²

In sum, the Syrian civil war is likely providing new talent for al-Qaeda’s international operations and has led to established threats like Nasar being freed. We cannot know with certainty if or when al-Qaeda operatives inside Syria will attempt to launch an attack against the U.S. homeland. And America’s defenses have greatly improved since 9/11, making it more difficult for such an attack to succeed. How-

⁸9/11 Commission Report, pp. 365–374.

⁹9/11 Commission Report, pp. 366.

¹⁰9/11 Commission Report, p. 367.

¹¹This “over there”-“over here” dynamic was first used in the 9/11 Commission’s final report. See p. 362.

¹²David Samuels, “The New Mastermind of Jihad,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 6, 2012. See: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303299604577323750859163544.html>.

ever, we should be mindful that the Syrian conflict opens new possibilities for al-Qaeda, which is always probing our defenses for a weakness.

AL-QAEDA'S NETWORK IN IRAN

There is no doubt that Iran and al-Qaeda are on opposite sides of the Syrian war today. Iran supports Bashar al Assad's crumbling regime, while al-Qaeda's Al Nusra Front is one of the leading insurgency groups opposed to Assad. This obvious conflict of interest must create new tension between al-Qaeda and Iran. It may very well lead their relationship in a new direction. However, it would be a mistake to assume, absent significant evidence, that the fight in Syria will necessarily end the relationship between the Iranian regime and al-Qaeda, which has always simultaneously entailed both mistrust and collusion.

In fact, al-Qaeda and Iran have frequently worked together even in the face of divergent interests. For example, Iran allowed some al-Qaeda leaders to operate on its soil following the 9/11 attacks, but placed them under a form of house arrest in 2003. This reportedly prompted Osama bin Laden to threaten the Iranians with violence if they did not release al-Qaeda leaders and al-Qaeda family members from custody. The Iranians did not release all of the al-Qaeda members from house arrest, but the two still found common ground for cooperation. Then, in 2009, al-Qaeda kidnapped an Iranian diplomat, holding him hostage in order to force the Iranians' hand in freeing these same al-Qaeda members. This led to a hostage exchange between the two. But despite such antagonistic episodes, Iran and al-Qaeda have repeatedly cooperated when it suits their common interests.

Under the Obama administration, the U.S. Treasury Department has led the way in exposing al-Qaeda's Iran-based network and the agreement that led to its existence. Since July 2011, the Treasury Department has issued three separate designations targeting al-Qaeda's Iran-based network. It is important to note that this network remains active under an "agreement" between Iran and al-Qaeda, even as the two support opposite sides in the Syrian war. In addition, the State Department has repeatedly pointed to this same agreement, issuing rewards for al-Qaeda leaders inside Iran.

The Treasury Department Targets Iran's "Secret Deal" With al-Qaeda

On July 28, 2011, the Treasury Department designated six al-Qaeda members who formed the core of al-Qaeda's Iran-based network at the time.¹³ Some of the terrorists are based elsewhere, but work with Iran-based facilitators to move fighters and money. The Treasury Department explained that this al-Qaeda network is "headed by Ezedin Abdel Aziz Khalil, a prominent Iran-based al-Qaeda facilitator, operating under an agreement between al-Qaeda and the Iranian government." Khalil is otherwise known as Yasin al Suri.

"Iran is the leading state sponsor of terrorism in the world today," Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David S. Cohen said when announcing this designation. "By exposing Iran's secret deal with al-Qaeda allowing it to funnel funds and operatives through its territory, we are illuminating yet another aspect of Iran's unmatched support for terrorism," Cohen explained. He continued: "Today's action also seeks to disrupt this key network and deny al-Qaeda's senior leadership much-needed support."

The Treasury Department described Iran as "a critical transit point for funding to support al-Qaeda's activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan" and noted that "Iranian authorities maintain a relationship with Khalil and have permitted him to operate within Iran's borders since 2005." Khalil's activities included moving "money and recruits from across the Middle East into Iran, then on to Pakistan," where they served other senior al-Qaeda leaders.

The Treasury Department hinted at the game Iranian authorities play in their relationship with al-Qaeda. Khalil "works with the Iranian government to arrange releases of al-Qaeda personnel from Iranian prisons." After they are released, "the Iranian government transfers them to Khalil, who then facilitates their travel to Pakistan."

One of the al-Qaeda leaders then working with Khalil and included in the July 2011 designation was Atiyah Abd al Rahman, who was subsequently killed in a drone strike the following month, on August 22, 2011 in North Waziristan, Paki-

¹³ See U.S. Treasury Department Press Release, "Treasury Targets Key Al-Qa'ida Funding and Support Network Using Iran as a Critical Transit Point," July 28, 2011. The press release can be found online at: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1261.aspx> (last accessed May 20, 2013).

stan.¹⁴ According to the Treasury Department, Rahman was al-Qaeda's "overall commander in Pakistan's tribal areas and as of late 2010, the leader of al-Qaeda in North and South Waziristan, Pakistan." The Treasury Department added: "Rahman was previously appointed by Osama bin Laden to serve as al-Qaeda's emissary in Iran, a position which allowed him to travel in and out of Iran with the permission of Iranian officials."

A little more than two weeks prior to the Treasury Department's designation, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Rahman was al-Qaeda's "operations chief" and was working with bin Laden to assemble a terrorist cell capable of hitting America on the tenth anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks.¹⁵ According to the newspaper, the intelligence tying Rahman to the plot was found in communications recovered during the May 2011 U.S. raid on bin Laden's safe house in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Anonymous officials told *The Wall Street Journal* that the "plans were only in the discussion phase" and there were no "signs the nascent plot ever went beyond the early planning."

The Treasury Department Designates Iran's MOIS for Supporting al-Qaeda, Among Other Acts

On February 16, 2012, the U.S. Treasury Department designated the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) "for its support to terrorist groups as well as its central role in perpetrating human rights abuses against the citizens of Iran and its role in supporting the Syrian regime as it continues to commit human rights abuses against the people of Syria."¹⁶

Al-Qaeda and its affiliate, al-Qaeda in Iraq, are among the terrorist groups supported by the MOIS, which is Iran's chief intelligence agency. "Today we have designated the MOIS for abusing the basic human rights of Iranian citizens and exporting its vicious practices to support the Syrian regime's abhorrent crackdown on its own population," Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David S. Cohen explained in a press release. Cohen added: "In addition, we are designating the MOIS for its support to terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda in Iraq, Hizballah and HAMAS, again exposing the extent of Iran's sponsorship of terrorism as a matter of Iranian state policy."

The MOIS is assisting al-Qaeda in a variety of ways. The Treasury Department revealed that "MOIS has facilitated the movement of al-Qaeda operatives in Iran and provided them with documents, identification cards, and passports." In addition, the MOIS has "provided money and weapons to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) . . . and negotiated prisoner releases of AQI operatives."

The Treasury Department "Further Exposes" Iran-al-Qaeda Relationship

On October 18, 2012, the U.S. Treasury Department designated Adel Radi Saqr al Wahabi al Harbi, who is "a key member of an al-Qaeda network operating in Iran and led by Iran-based al-Qaeda facilitator Muhsin al Fadhli."¹⁷ This is the same network that was previously headed by Ezedin Abdel Aziz Khalil (a.k.a. Yasin al Suri), as revealed in the Treasury Department's July 2011 designation discussed above. Al Fadhli took over as chief of al-Qaeda's Iran-based network in late 2011, after the U.S. Government openly identified and offered a reward for his predecessor.

Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David S. Cohen explained that the October 2012 designation built upon the July 2011 designation and "further exposes al-Qaeda's critically important Iran-based funding and facilitation network." Cohen added: "We will continue targeting this crucial source of al-Qaeda's funding and support, as well as highlight Iran's on-going complicity in this network's operation."

Muhsin al Fadhli is a long-time al-Qaeda operative who was previously designated by the U.S. Government in 2005. Al Fadhli is so trusted within al-Qaeda that he was one of the few terrorists with foreknowledge of the 9/11 attacks. When he was first designated in 2005, al Fadhli was "considered an al-Qaeda leader in

¹⁴ Bill Roggio, "Al Qaeda announces death of Atiyah Abd al Rahman," *The Long War Journal*, December 1, 2011. See: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/12/al_qaeda_announces_d.php.

¹⁵ Siobhan Gorman, "Bin Laden Plotted New Attack," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 15, 2011. See: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304521304576446213098582284.html>.

¹⁶ U.S. Treasury Department Press Release, "Treasury Designates Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security for Human Rights Abuses and Support for Terrorism," February 16, 2012. See: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1424.aspx>.

¹⁷ U.S. Treasury Department Press Release, "Treasury Further Exposes Iran-Based Al-Qaeda Network," October 18, 2012. See: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1741.aspx>

the Gulf” who “provided support to Iraq-based fighters for attacks against” the U.S.-led Coalition. Al Fadhli was also a “major facilitator” for deceased AQI [al-Qaeda in Iraq] leader Abu Musab al Zarqawi. And prior to his involvement in the Iraqi insurgency, al Fadhli “was involved in several terrorist attacks that took place in October 2002 including the attacks on the French ship MV Limburg and against U.S. Marines on Faylaka Island in Kuwait.”

Al Fadhli “began working with al-Qaeda’s Iran-based facilitation network in 2009 and was later arrested by the Iranians,” according to the Treasury Department. Al Fadhli “was subsequently released by the Iranians in 2011 and went on to assume the leadership of the facilitation network from Yasin al Suri later that year.” Today, al Fadhli’s Iran-based network provides “funding for al-Qaeda activities in Afghanistan and Pakistan”, and moves “fighters and money through Turkey to support al-Qaeda-affiliated elements in Syria.” Al Fadhli is also “leveraging his extensive network of Kuwaiti jihadist donors to send money to Syria via Turkey,” according to Treasury.

Al Harbi serves as al Fadhli’s deputy. In that capacity, according to Treasury, al Harbi “facilitates the travel of extremists to Afghanistan or Iraq via Iran on behalf of al-Qaeda, and is believed to have sought funds to support al-Qaeda attacks.” Al Harbi joined al-Qaeda’s network in Iran in 2011, but was previously added to Saudi Arabia’s Most Wanted List. The Saudi Ministry of Interior charged al Harbi with “traveling to Afghanistan to join al-Qaeda and providing technical support on the Internet to the terrorist group.”

Explanation of the “Agreement” Between Iran and al-Qaeda

The Treasury Department’s October 2012 announcement contained new details concerning the “agreement” between Iran and al-Qaeda. “Under the terms of the agreement between al-Qaeda and Iran,” Treasury reported, “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,” Treasury continued, “the Government of Iran gave the Iran-based al-Qaeda network freedom of operation and uninhibited ability to travel for extremists and their families.” If al-Qaeda members “violate these terms” they “run the risk of being detained by Iranian authorities.”

The previous head of the network, Ezedin Abdel Aziz Khalil (a.k.a. Yasin al Suri), “agreed to the terms of this agreement with Iran with the knowledge of now-deceased al-Qaeda leader ‘Atiyah ‘Abd al Rahman.” Rahman, who was killed in a drone strike in August 2011, is discussed above. Despite the U.S. Government’s efforts, however, Treasury says that “Iran continues to allow al-Qaeda to operate a core pipeline that moves al-Qaeda money and fighters through Iran to support al-Qaeda activities in South Asia.” And “this network also sends funding and fighters to Syria.”

AL-QAEDA’S NETWORK IN IRAN TIED TO PLOTS AGAINST WESTERN INTERESTS

Under the Obama administration, the Treasury and State Departments have made it clear that al-Qaeda’s network inside Iran plays a vital role in shuttling terrorists to and from the Middle East and South Asia. In this section, I am going to extend this analysis, pointing to ties between this same network and three plots against Western interests outside of war zones. The first plot was in 2010, when al-Qaeda sought to launch Mumbai-style attacks against Western cities. The al-Qaeda operatives selected to take part in the attacks used Iranian soil to transit to and from northern Pakistan. After the plot was disrupted, some of them were sheltered inside Iran as well.

The second al-Qaeda plot was foiled by Canadian authorities in April. Canadian officials revealed that the plotters received “direction and guidance” from al-Qaeda members in Iran. The third al-Qaeda plot was broken up by Egyptian authorities earlier this month. The cell responsible reportedly targeted the U.S. and French Embassies in Cairo and received assistance from a senior al-Qaeda leader who may be the same terrorist who currently heads al-Qaeda’s network in Iran.

2010 Mumbai-style Plot Against Europe

In March 2012, an alleged al-Qaeda operative named Ahmad Wali Siddiqui went on trial in Koblenz, Germany.¹⁸ Siddiqui was reportedly slated to take part in one of the final plots ordered by Osama bin Laden, who wanted to launch Mumbai-style attacks in European cities. Siddiqui’s testimony, as well as other evidence, dem-

¹⁸This section is based on an article I co-authored for *The Weekly Standard*. Benjamin Weinthal and Thomas Joscelyn, “Al Qaeda’s Network in Iran,” *The Weekly Standard*, April 2, 2012. See: http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/al-qaeda-s-network-iran__634428.html

onstrated that this al-Qaeda cell used the very same Iran-based terror network that, according to the Treasury Department, operates “under an agreement between al-Qaeda and the Iranian government.”

During his testimony, Siddiqui, a dual German and Afghan citizen, discussed the time he and his fellow plotters spent at the same mosque attended by al-Qaeda’s 9/11 Hamburg cell, as well as his own transformation into a violent jihadist. “We wanted to fight . . . against Americans,” Siddiqui told the court. Siddiqui initially joined the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a terrorist organization closely allied with al-Qaeda, in northern Pakistan. He quickly migrated to al-Qaeda itself. According to the German indictment, senior terrorists decided to send Siddiqui back to Germany to take part in a potentially devastating attack intended “to weaken Europe’s economy.” After Siddiqui was captured in Afghanistan, he revealed the nascent plot.

In testimony before the court, Siddiqui described how he and his co-conspirators planned different travel routes in order to avoid suspicion beginning in early 2009. But their travels had a common theme: Iran was their principal gateway to jihad.

According to Siddiqui, two of his co-conspirators—Rami Makanesi and Naamen Meziche—traveled from Vienna to Tehran in order “to not get caught.” Their trip was booked in a Hamburg travel office by an unknown Iranian. Siddiqui explained that the pair could not travel directly to Pakistan because they are Arabs. Pakistani authorities would have questioned the duo’s intentions and perhaps detained them, but by traveling through Iran they avoided such scrutiny.

When Makanesi and Meziche arrived in Tehran, Siddiqui explained, they called a facilitator known as “Dr. Mamoud,” who works for the IMU. The two were ushered to Zahedan, a city on the eastern border of Iran, close to both Afghanistan and Pakistan. There, Siddiqui says, Dr. Mamoud “welcomed them.”

Zahedan is a well-known hub of al-Qaeda and IMU activity. The IMU has repeatedly used the city’s Makki mosque, the largest Sunni mosque in Iran, to shuttle fighters into Afghanistan and Pakistan. Al-Qaeda has an established presence there, too. For instance, before his May 2011 suicide at Guantánamo, an Afghan detainee named Inayatullah allegedly admitted to authorities that he was al-Qaeda’s emir of Zahedan, from where he delivered recruits to senior al-Qaeda leaders in Pakistan. Even since Inayatullah’s capture, al-Qaeda fighters have continued to travel through Zahedan, as Makanesi and Meziche did. And, as explained below, the al-Qaeda plot disrupted in Canada in April reportedly involved this very same hub in Zahedan.

Meziche has long been known to European counterterrorism officials. His father-in-law, Mohamed al-Fazazi, was a radical preacher whose sermons and spiritual advice guided al-Qaeda’s 9/11 Hamburg cell. Meziche was reportedly close to Mohamed Atta, the lead hijacker in the 9/11 attacks, and Ramzi bin al-Shibh, al-Qaeda’s point man for the 9/11 operation. Bin al-Shibh reportedly tried to call Meziche just days before the 9/11 attacks. Meziche was later implicated in al-Qaeda in Iraq’s operations after European officials found that he had been recruiting fighters for the organization.

According to *Der Spiegel*, senior al-Qaeda terrorists instructed Meziche and another member of the cell, an Iranian national named Shahab Dashti, to travel to Iran where “they would be told where in Europe they were to be deployed to begin building structures for bin Laden’s organization.”¹⁹ Once in Iran, Dashti “was to undergo facial plastic surgery” because he had already appeared in a propaganda video and was therefore recognizable to European authorities. However, Dashti did not get a chance to fool Western intelligence officials, because he was killed in a drone strike in northern Pakistan in early October 2010, after the Mumbai-style plot was uncovered.

Initial reports indicated that Meziche was killed in the same drone strike, but he survived it and was sheltered by the Iranians before being captured inside Pakistan. *The New York Times* reported in January 2012 that Meziche and several other members of the cell are “waiting in Iran, trying to return to Europe.”²⁰ European authorities were not eager to see them come back, as they posed obvious security risks. Anonymous U.S. officials interviewed by the *Times* described Meziche and one of his Iran-based compatriots as “lower mid-level” al-Qaeda operatives. “These two have been involved in al-Qaeda external operations activities for some time now,”

¹⁹Hubert Gude, “Key Al-Qaida Witness: Hamburg Islamist to Stand Trial in Germany,” *Spiegel Online*, February 28, 2012. See: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/key-al-qaida-witness-hamburg-islamist-to-stand-trial-in-germany-a-817984.html>.

²⁰Soud Mekhennet, “Hiding in Iran, Raising Suspicions in Europe,” *The New York Times*, January 10, 2012. See: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/10/world/middleeast/hiding-in-iran-raising-suspicions-in-europe.html?_r=0.

one official said. Citing multiple intelligence sources, *The New York Times* explained that “Iran appears to be harboring them in hopes that, when and if they leave, they will cause trouble in the West.”

Rami Makanesi, who set off for Tehran with Meziche, was arrested in Pakistan in 2010 and sentenced to nearly 5 years in prison last year by a Frankfurt court. Makanesi has his own ties to Iran-based al-Qaeda operatives. According to Guido Steinberg, a researcher in the Middle East and North Africa division of the German Institute for International Security Affairs, Makanesi met a top al-Qaeda operative known as Ezedin Abdel Aziz Khalil (a.k.a. Yasin al Suri) in February 2010. Khalil is the same al-Qaeda leader who was designated by the Treasury Department in July 2011. Steinberg, in his analysis brief for IHS Jane’s, a military and intelligence consulting group, explains that Khalil asked Makanesi to “accompany him to Iran.” Makanesi said that Khalil “was responsible for funneling money and recruits via Iran and that he was known to cooperate with the Iranian government.”

When the Treasury Department designated Khalil in 2011, it also designated several other members of al-Qaeda who utilize the Iran-based network. As explained above, one of them was Atiyah Abd al Rahman, who was subsequently killed in a drone strike in northern Pakistan. The Treasury Department explained: “Rahman was previously appointed by Osama bin Laden to serve as al-Qaeda’s emissary in Iran, a position which allowed him to travel in and out of Iran with the permission of Iranian officials.” Makanesi seems to have at least known Rahman. According to Steinberg, Makanesi has explained that Rahman “was known to have lived in Iran for many years.”

The evidence in this matter is clear. The al-Qaeda cell that was selected to take part in one of Osama bin Laden’s last plots against the West was facilitated by the same Iran-based network that the Treasury and State Departments have repeatedly pointed to as evidence of collusion between al-Qaeda and the Iranian regime. This does not mean that Iranian officials orchestrated the plot or were otherwise directly involved. Then again, we cannot rule out the possibility. At a minimum, al-Qaeda’s network in Iran played a key role.

DISRUPTED PLOT AGAINST TRAINS IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA

On April 22, 2013, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) announced that they had disrupted an al-Qaeda plot to derail a passenger train traveling from New York to Toronto.²¹ Canadian officials directly implicated al-Qaeda in the plot. “This is the first known al-Qaeda planned attack that we’ve experienced in Canada,” Superintendent Doug Best told reporters.²² “Had this plot been carried out, it would have resulted in innocent people being killed or seriously injured,” Assistant RCMP Commissioner James Malizia said. RCMP chief superintendent Jennifer Strachan explained that the plot “was definitely in the planning stage but not imminent.”²³ Strachan elaborated: “We are alleging that these two individuals took steps and conducted activities to initiate a terrorist attack. They watched trains and railways.”

Canadian officials added a key allegation: The plotters received “direction and guidance” from al-Qaeda members in Iran.

According to *Reuters*, investigators think that one of the suspects “traveled to Iran on a trip that was directly relevant to the investigation of the alleged plot.”²⁴ *Reuters* added: “U.S. national security sources close to the investigation said that was a reference to a network of low- to middle-level al-Qaeda fixers and ‘facilitators’ based in the town of Zahedan, close to Iran’s borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan, that moves money and fighters through Iran to support its activities in South Asia.”

This is, once again, the same al-Qaeda network that operates under an “agreement” with the Iranian regime. Canadian officials say they have not find evidence implicating Iranian officials in the plot. But Iran’s provision of safe haven to al-Qaeda is a significant factor by itself. More details about the al-Qaeda’s cells contacts inside Iran will hopefully emerge during the forthcoming court proceedings.

²¹ Royal Canadian Mounted Police, “RCMP Arrests Two Individuals for Terrorism-related Charges,” April 22, 2013. See: <http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/news-nouvelles/2013/04-22-ns-sne-eng.htm>.

²² CBS News and Associated Press, “2 arrested in terror plot against Canadian passenger train, police say,” April 22, 2013. See: http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-202_162-57580804/2-arrested-in-terror-plot-against-canadian-passenger-train-police-say/.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Mark Hosenball, “Canada train plot suspect traveled to Iran: U.S. officials,” *Reuters*, April 25, 2013. See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/25/us-arrests-iran-idUSBRE93-01D320130425>.

DISRUPTED PLOT AGAINST THE AMERICAN AND FRENCH EMBASSIES IN CAIRO

On May 11, 2013, Egyptian interior minister Mohammed Ibrahim announced that an al-Qaeda plot against a Western embassy and other targets had been disrupted. The interior minister said that two suspected terrorists are being held for questioning and a third is under house arrest. The Egyptian government did not initially say which embassy the three-man cell targeted. *The New York Times* reported, however, that “a Western official said the Egyptians had privately identified the embassy as the United States Embassy in Cairo.”²⁵ Subsequently, the Egyptians identified both the American and French Embassies as targets.

The Egyptian interior ministry revealed three significant details about the plotters. First, the Egyptians alleged that they had been trained in the north Sinai, with the intention of fighting inside Syria. This again demonstrates how the war in Syria is having ripple effects throughout the region. Second, Ibrahim said the al-Qaeda cell was in contact with the so-called “Nasr City Cell,” which has its own ties to al-Qaeda. The Nasr City Cell has also been tied to the September 11, 2012 terrorist attack in Benghazi, Libya.²⁶ Third, Ibrahim pointed to two ties to al-Qaeda’s network inside Iran.

Ibrahim said that one member of the al-Qaeda cell had received “military training” inside Iran, as well as Pakistan. The interior minister also identified a key point of contact for the cell as a senior al-Qaeda terrorist known as Dawud al Asadi, who told the trio “to get in touch with a terrorist cell in the Cairo neighborhood of Nasr City.”²⁷

Ibrahim did not offer many details about al Asadi, other than to describe him as “the head of al-Qaeda in some west Asian countries,” which is somewhat vague. Dawud al Asadi is, in fact, one of the aliases used by Muhsin al Fadhli, the head of al-Qaeda’s network in Iran.²⁸ Al Fadhli is described above. He was designated as the head of al-Qaeda’s network inside Iran in October 2012. Therefore, if the al Asadi mentioned by the Egyptian interior minister is in fact Muhsin al Fadhli, then this is yet another indication that al-Qaeda’s leadership inside Iran is projecting terror far beyond the mullahs’ borders.

Mr. KING. Thank you, Mr. Joscelyn.

Our next witness, Mr. Barack Barfi, is a research fellow at the New America Foundation and focuses on Arab and Islamic affairs. Previously Mr. Barfi was a visiting fellow at the Brookings Doha Center and prior to that was a producer with ABC News affiliates in the Middle East where he reported from countries such as Iraq and Lebanon.

Throughout his academic and media careers, Mr. Barfi has had extensive travel and access to local ears in the Middle East, has experienced first-hand the dilemmas confronting the region.

Mr. Barfi, pleased to have you here today. I look forward to your testimony. Thank you.

STATEMENT OF BARAK BARFI, RESEARCH FELLOW, NEW AMERICA FOUNDATION

Mr. BARFI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Higgins, and Members of the committee. Thank you for inviting me to testify today about al-Qaeda’s operations in Syria.

²⁵ Ben Hubbard, “3 Arrested in Plot to Bomb Egyptian Cities and Embassy,” *The New York Times*, May 11, 2013. See: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/12/world/middleeast/egypt-arrests-3-in-plot-to-attack-cities-and-an-embassy.html>.

²⁶ Thomas Joscelyn, “Egyptian interior minister: Al Qaeda cell plotted suicide attack against Western embassy,” *The Long War Journal*, May 11, 2013. See: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/05/egyptian_interior_mi.php.

²⁷ Ben Hubbard, “3 Arrested in Plot to Bomb Egyptian Cities and Embassy,” *The New York Times*, May 11, 2013. See: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/12/world/middleeast/egypt-arrests-3-in-plot-to-attack-cities-and-an-embassy.html>.

²⁸ State Department Rewards for Justice, “Wanted, Information leading to the location of Muhsin al-Fadhli, Up to \$7 Million Reward.” See: <http://www.rewardsforjustice.net/index.cfm?page=fadhli>.

I would particularly like to commend Chairman King for the perfect pronunciation of my name, something my teachers could not do in school.

[Laughter.]

Mr. KING. I am good for something, I guess.

Mr. BARFI. After the organization was stripped of its Afghan sanctuary following the 9/11 attacks, and its core leadership decimated in Pakistan, the group decided to embrace a more decentralized model that focused on regional affiliates.

These branches have succeeded in keeping al-Qaeda relevant even as it absorbs lethal hits around the world.

The Middle East revolutions known as the Arab Spring have posed new dilemmas for the organization. As the frustrated youth that was to fuel the al-Qaeda revolutions flocked to the streets in Egypt and Libya to overthrow long-ruling leaders, the jihadist narrative the organization parroted seemed increasingly irrelevant. With dreaded security services neutered, Arabs could control their own destinies without resorting to violence.

But as has consistently happened in the decade since the 9/11 attacks, al-Qaeda has been able to take advantage of events in the Middle East to reassert its importance.

Today a Syrian civil war that has descended into urban anarchy has provided the organization a new theater to stage its operations. In a nation where the government controls less than a quarter of the country's territory, internal and external actors have been able to carve out spheres of influence.

Al-Qaeda created the organization The Support Front for the People of the Levant, known locally as Jabhat al-Nusra, or JN, to front its activities in Syria.

Despite its recent emergence, JN has a long history. It evolved from the networks the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi established when he moved his operations from Afghanistan to Iraq following the American invasion of Kabul. JN emerged in January 2012 when a suicide bomber targeted Syrian security officials.

Since then the group has carried out a number of suicide bombings, reaching into the regime's innermost sanctum. But it also has embraced conventional military tactics such as ambushes and assaults. Today, JN is considered one of the most effective rebel fighting forces.

Al-Qaeda thrives on instability and establishes its presence in undergoverned spaces. Such factors have become basic staples in a country that inches closer to Somalification with every passing day. The government has receded, armed groups control much of the countryside, and social welfare no longer exists outside of a handful of cities and regions.

Nevertheless, other indigenous geo-religious factors particular to Syria have drawn al-Qaeda there. Syria is ruled by a small Shi'i offshoot to which President al-Asad and leaders of the regime belong called Alawis.

Pre-twentieth century Islamic scholars decree the sect's members heretics. Al-Qaeda's ideology has historically prioritized fighting Shi'i infidels to combatting Jews and Christians.

Syria is also located at a strategic crossroads to which no other Arab state can lay claim. It borders several key countries including

Israel, jihadists' arch foe. While other al-Qaeda affiliates are located in remote areas on the periphery of the Middle East, a Levantine branch would have the ability to expand out in several directions.

While Syria has provided al-Qaeda a new haven, Syrians have proved receptive to its message. It should be stressed that much like in other havens, it is not the organization's ideology which is drawing it admirers. As the international community has abandoned Syrians to face a regime prepared to use all the weapons in its arsenal, they are increasingly willing to accept a lifeline from anyone prepared to offer them one.

For much of the revolution, Syrians believed the Free Syrian Army known as the FSA would provide it. But as the armed struggle has stalled, the FSA has stumbled. Its units are making little progress on the battlefield. Worse, they have drawn the ire of a population exhausted by their abuses. Theft, kidnappings for ransom, and torture have become its motto.

Everyday JN attracts new supporters dissatisfied with the FSA. They are drawn to its discipline, organization, and squeaky-clean image. JN's propensity to assist Syrians solve their problems, whether through mediation or aid, have also contributed to its popularity.

It runs a social welfare division that provides goods and services to a war-torn population. These networks are much more efficient than ones managed by FSA units.

The organization's battlefield successes have won it admiration as well. JN is the most effective rebel fighting unit. Its fighters are known for their bravery and dedication to the cause.

During my latest trip to Syria, Syrians beamed about JN's contribution to the revolution. These factors make JN the most admired rebel unit in the field. As the revolution spirals into a cauldron of chaos, the organization will only win over Syrians to its cause.

Unlike the FSA, JN's ultimate goal is not the overthrow of the Syrian regime. It seeks to carve out a new haven for al-Qaeda where the organization can operate in the heart of the Arab world. It is also bent on taking the fight to neighboring Israel.

But any attempt to do so will likely be met by resistance from FSA units sensitive to Western appeals. As a result, JN will have to combat other FSA units to ensure its freedom of mobility. For these reasons, JN does not currently pose a threat to the American homeland. The organization needs to focus on consolidating its local position before it can focus on the far enemy.

JN nevertheless poses problems for American interests in the Middle East. For Syria is not Las Vegas. What happens in Syria will not stay in Syria. The violence there is bound to spill over into neighboring countries, some of which are American allies. As such, containing JN should be a National interest.

With that I would be happy to answer any of your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Barfi follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF BARAK BARFI

Mr. Chairman, Members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today about al-Qaeda's operations in Syria. After the organization was stripped of its Afghan sanctuary following the 9/11 attacks, and its core leadership decimated

in Pakistan, the group decided to embrace a more decentralized model that focused on regional affiliates. These branches have succeeded in keeping al-Qaeda relevant even as it absorbs lethal hits around the world.

The Middle East revolutions known as the Arab Spring have posed new dilemmas for the organization. As the frustrated youth that was to fuel the al-Qaeda revolutions flocked to the streets in Egypt and Libya to overthrow long-ruling leaders, the jihadist narrative the organization parroted seemed increasingly irrelevant. With dreaded security services neutered, Arabs could control their destinies without resorting to violence.

But as has consistently happened in the decade since it rose to international prominence, al-Qaeda has been able to take advantage of events in the Middle East to reassert its importance. Today a Syrian civil war that has descended into urban anarchy has provided the organization a new theater to stage its operations. In a nation where the Government controls less than a quarter of the country's territory, internal and external actors have been able to carve out spheres of influence.

One of those is al-Qaeda. The organization's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has released several videos offering encouragement for Syria's revolution, while urging foreign jihadists to fight there. His appeals seem to be working. In March, British Foreign Minister William Hague said that "Syria today has become the top destination for jihadists."

AL-QAEDA IN SYRIA

Al-Qaeda created the organization *The Support Front for the People of the Levant*, known locally as Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), to front its activities in Syria. The late al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden recommended that the organization establish groups that did not bear its name because of the negative connotation associated with it in the aftermath of its Iraqi debacle.

Despite its recent emergence, JN has a long history. It evolved from the networks the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi established when he moved his operations from Afghanistan to Iraq following the American invasion of Kabul. He established cells in Levantine countries to funnel foreigners to Iraq. Following the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in March 2011, al-Qaeda's Iraqi affiliate sent between 150–200 operatives to Syria to establish a local infrastructure.

JN emerged in January 2012 when a suicide bomber targeted Syrian security officials. Since then the group has carried out a number of suicide bombings, reaching into the regime's innermost sanctums. But it also has embraced conventional military tactics such as ambushes and assaults. Today, JN is considered one of the most effective rebel fighting forces numbering between 1,500–5,000. Though the group has drawn members from Iraq, Jordan, and the Caucus Mountain states, the majority of its foot soldiers are nevertheless Syrians. In April, its leader known as Abu Muhammad al-Julani pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda, an act which has sown some divisions within the organization.

WHY SYRIA?

Al-Qaeda thrives on instability and establishes its presence in ungoverned spaces. Such factors have become basic staples in a country that inches closer to Somalification with every passing day. The government has receded, armed groups control much of the countryside and social welfare no longer exists outside a handful of cities and regions.

Nevertheless, other indigenous geo-religious factors particular to Syria have drawn al-Qaeda there. Syria is ruled by a small Shi'i offshoot known as Alawis to which President Bashar al-Asad belongs. Pre-twentieth century Islamic scholars decried the sect's members heretics. Al-Qaeda's ideology has historically prioritized fighting Shi'i infidels to combatting Jews and Christians. Moreover, by highlighting the sectarian nature of the conflict, JN can depict itself as protecting Sunnis from a Shi'i onslaught.

Syria is located at a strategic crossroads to which no other Arab nation can lay claim. It borders several key countries including Saudi Arabia and Israel, jihadists' arch foe. While other al-Qaeda affiliates are located in remote areas on the periphery of the Middle East, a Levantine branch would have the ability to expand out in several directions.

Syria will have no government for years as it increasingly becomes a Middle Eastern Somalia. JN's successes will allow al-Qaeda to carve out a sphere of influence unimpeded by a regime's attempts to neutralize it.

Syria has an eschatological significance. Medieval Islamic literature predicts many apocalyptic battles will occur there, thus convincing jihadists seeking the ultimate martyrdom to flock to Syria.

WHY JN APPEALS TO SYRIANS

While Syria has provided al-Qaeda a new haven, Syrians have proved receptive to its message. It should be stressed that much like in other theaters, it is not the organization's ideology which is drawing its admirers. As the international community has abandoned Syrians to face a regime prepared to use all the weapons in its arsenal, they are increasingly willing to accept a lifeline from anyone willing to offer them one.

For much of the revolution, Syrians believed the rebel-led Free Syrian Army (FSA) would provide it. But as the armed struggle has stalled, the largely nationalist FSA has stumbled. Its units are making little progress on the battlefield. Worse, they have drawn the ire of a population exhausted by their abuses. Theft, kidnappings for ransom, and torture have become their motto.

Everyday JN attracts new supporters dissatisfied with the FSA. They are drawn to its discipline, organization, and squeaky-clean image. JN's propensity to assist Syrians solve their problems, whether through mediation or aid, have also contributed to its popularity. It runs a social welfare division that provides goods and services to a war-torn population. These networks are much more efficient and responsive than ones managed by FSA units.

The organization's battlefield successes have won it admiration as well. JN is the most effective rebel unit. Its fighters are known for their bravery and dedication to the cause. During my latest visit to Syria, Syrians beamed about JN's contribution to the revolution. These factors make JN the most admired rebel unit in the field. And as the revolution spirals into a cauldron of chaos, the organization will only win over Syrians to its cause.

MODUS OPERANDI

JN has established a hierarchical organization that comprises military, political, and religious committees. It is highly compartmentalized with members often not knowing those in other cells. It subjects prospective candidates to a rigorous initiation process, imbuing its members with a sense of duty and belonging.

JN's operational influence in Syria is mixed. Though it pioneered the use of suicide bombings, most FSA units have eschewed such attacks. JN has been more successful in persuading rebel groups to embrace improvised explosive devices.

Though JN has refused to join the FSA or other more Islamist-orientated organizations, it nevertheless cooperates with rebel units. It participates in joint operations and amicably divides the spoils between them.

Like other FSA units, JN operates in the open, hanging its shingle on the door. During a recent visit to Aleppo, I lived in the building next door to the one JN was occupying. Its fighters buzzed around the complex. Though it maintains operational secrecy and largely avoids the international media, it nevertheless maintains an open presence throughout Syria.

TURNING A NEW PAGE

Al-Qaeda's widespread bloodletting in Iraq tarnished the organization's image. The organization and other jihadists have sought to draw lessons from their failed Iraq experience. Their treatises are full of exhortations to avoid killing individuals from Syrian minorities allied to the regime. JN has heeded this advice. It has not targeted Alawi civilians, instead focusing on those who work for the regime. And unlike in Iraq, JN focuses exclusively on military targets, thus minimizing civilian casualties.

The organization's religio-political program is purposefully vague to avoid alienating certain constituencies. It has not delineated a vision for a post-Asad Syria. In contrast, other puritanical groups known as Salafis have been much more explicit about the type of state they plan to build on the rubble of the one being destroyed. JN has nevertheless employed some vice squads in areas under its control.

In embracing this middle path, JN seeks to avoid the pitfalls that sank its Iraqi sibling. The organization is cognizant that its success depends on ingratiating itself with the local population rather than ensuring its grip on society through a reign of terror. It remains to be seen if this is a short-term tactical shift or a permanent turn. Once JN has accomplished its transitional goal of overthrowing the regime it may seek to impose its views on its subjects.

THE DAY AFTER

Unlike the FSA, JN's ultimate goal is not the overthrow of the Syrian regime. It seeks to carve out a new haven for al-Qaeda where the organization can operate in the heart of the Arab world. It is also bent on taking the fight to neighboring Israel.

But any attempt to do so will likely be met by resistance from FSA units sensitive to Western appeals. As a result, JN will have to combat other FSA units to ensure its freedom of mobility. For these reasons, JN does not currently pose a threat to the American homeland. The organization needs to focus on consolidating its local position before it can focus on the far enemy.

JN nevertheless poses problems for American interests in the Middle East. For Syria is not Las Vegas. What happens in Syria will not stay in Syria. The violence there is bound to spill over into neighboring countries, some of which are American allies. As such, containing JN should be a national interest.

Mr. KING. We thank, thank all of you for your testimony.

I will begin the questioning.

First on Syria, on the issue of foreign fighters, and with the porous borders particularly through Turkey, and with the threat of these foreign fighters returning to Europe and then coming to the United States with British passports, EU passports, visa waiver policies.

What more do you think we should be doing? Do you believe that the European countries are as concerned about this as they should be? What do you see as the level of cooperation between Europe and the United States particularly regarding these, you know, the foreign fighters?

To start we can go down, Dr. Jones, Mr. Simcox, Mr. Joscelyn, Mr. Barfi. If anyone cares to comment.

Mr. JONES. Mr. Chairman, very briefly, I think in my conversations with several European ambassadors including from this town and then other government officials from Europe, I think they are extremely concerned about the both departure and then the inflow of foreign fighters coming to their countries from Europe. I do not believe however that they have in all cases a good reign on who they are and the total number of individuals coming in and coming out.

Once they leave German soil or Swedish soil they may not have a particularly good insight about what is happening inside of Syria. So I think in this case, it is contingent on the United States to get information from sources on the ground in Syria. That does include any covert units from other countries whether they are from Jordan or from Saudi Arabia or from Turkey or from the United Arab Emirates that are actually on the ground in Syria.

I think this is the biggest black hole for fighters going into and out of Syria is what are they doing and who are they talking to and what are their intentions based on what they are doing in Syria.

I think that is where we have our biggest vagaries on what is going on and so in that sense I think probably not enough is being done in country to collect on and patch information on what is going on in Syria and the United States has very little eyes on in country.

Again, I think that is a very big weakness of the United States—its inability to understand what is going on at Syria.

Mr. KING. Before we go on to the witnesses on this question, I make the maybe overly-generalized statement but my experience has been I know in our negotiations with Europeans often our European partners think we are too concerned about terror watch list, too concerned about who is coming over on planes to the United States.

Is that diminished at all, and how is that going to affect something which is even more vague right now: Who is coming from Syria and who is not? I will ask if all of you can address that.

Mr. JONES. Mr. Chairman, again I can only tell you what I have heard from several European ambassadors who are concerned about those numbers.

Still, I think their external agencies and their external agency's presence in Syria in some cases especially with some of Nordic countries is not that good.

So they may be concerned about individuals that they have a sense of, but they don't know the specifics in general what they are doing, which is why they come to people like me.

Do you have any sense of what they are doing when they get to Syria? If they are asking me that question, they don't know.

Mr. KING. Well, we are asking you too, so—

[Laughter.]

Mr. Simcox.

Mr. SIMCOX. First of all, you mentioned that the Europeans believe that the Americans are too worried about—Europeans aren't worried enough would be the way I look at it.

We have no reason to be complacent in Europe about terrorism taking place within the European borders and we have no reason to be complacent about terrorism from Europe being exported to the States.

European security agencies are extremely concerned though about what will happen to these fighters when they return. The other thing I think that is a big concern for them is what—how does this end in Syria and how does it impact in Europe in the long run? In terms of if there is a series of mini fiefdoms in the eastern parts of Syria, the al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda-affiliated groups control is that then a new safe haven that Europeans are going to be able to go and train in—obviously via Turkey, ideally giving them access to training camps in a way that hasn't been possible probably since prior to 9/11.

My sense is that unfortunately we are truly in guesswork when it comes to how many people are there from Europe and what they are doing and their intentions are when they get back. I think we are flying blind on that.

Mr. KING. Mr. Joscelyn, I know you are focused on Iran, going to come back to that in my second round if you want to—

Mr. Barfi.

I am sorry—you want to—

Mr. JOSCELYN. Actually I would, if I could, just something I—

Mr. KING. Absolutely.

Mr. JOSCELYN. I totally agree with what Seth and Robin were saying about the potential for new talent going to Syria. I think they are right on the money in what they say.

I want to highlight something from my testimony too, which is what I call the return of old talent to the battlefield because of one of my concerns in all of this is there is credible threat reporting, credible press reporting, I am sorry, about a guy named Abu Musab al Suri, is his nom de guerre, otherwise known as Mustafa Setmariam Nasar, who is a chief al-Qaeda ideologue.

He is known in al-Qaeda circles and in jihadist circles as one of the preeminent thinkers for how to come after the West. He was imprisoned in Syria before the rebellion there.

I actually don't agree with the decision to send him to Syria for imprisonment and for reasons just like this, and there is credible reporting that he has been freed.

This is the type of guy who I would be very concerned about if I were on your committee because he is a guy who has written at great length about creative ways to attack the West.

There is all sorts of reporting that he was deeply involved with al-Qaeda in Europe prior to him being detained in 2005. There is a lot of credible reporting that he was involved in the Madrid train bombings in 2004, also the attacks in July 2005 in London.

So this is the return of what I will call old talent to the game for as a consequence of what is happening inside Syria. Another name I just want to throw out there, and this has not appeared anywhere publicly and this is just my own sort of nerdism, I guess, is a guy named Mohammad Zammar was a key recruiter for the Hamburg cell for 9/11.

He was detained and shipped off to Syria and imprisoned by the Assad regime. I would take a keen interest in trying to find out if I were sitting in your shoes where he is today and if there is any classified information which I am not privy to about where he is and where he is going because Zummar was directly involved in 9/11, he was imprisoned in Syria, and I would take a deep concern about where he is today.

Mr. KING. Thank you.

Mr. Barfi.

Mr. BARFI. The problem with Europeans going to Syria is we just can't get a handle on it. Once they leave their home countries they are pretty much going to fall off the radar. If you go to Turkey it is not like traveling to Pakistan. I mean it doesn't raise red flags, why are you going to Turkey? I want to see Europe or I want to go check out some nice islands, check out some ruins.

Another problem is once they go to Turkey, you don't even know how they are going to cross. Are they going to cross using the official crossings or they going to cross orchard groves and across orchard groves and fields, which is a lot of people do that.

I crossed legally on a trip to Syria. Some of the Syrians that I was with that took me in some parts of their family did not have passports so they could not leave the country officially from Syria to Turkey so they crossed through the fields and they came back through the fields when I went in. I crossed legally and they went to the fields.

This is a phenomenon you will see all the time so you won't even see these people with any stamps and their passports that they have even been to Syria. So they are going to fall off the radar.

I personally have not met any of these Europeans but I know a lot of people who have. You show up in these towns in these border towns in Turkey—I have a good friend to the taxi driver he said, "Yes, I took a few French guys across the border the other day."

It is a big problem. We are not going to be able to find out what they are doing, what units they are hooking up with. All we are going to find out is a martyrdom notice on a jihadist website; XX

so-and-so died fighting in so-and-so battle and he was from France or he was from Belgium.

So it is a big problem. What are they doing there? What is going to happen when they come back? Are they going to radicalize others in the West? Are they going to bring back bomb-making training or whatnot and this is something we are going to have to understand when the blowback comes back, not when they are inside because it is just too hard to find out answers to those questions at this point in time.

Mr. KING. Mr. Barfi, in your testimony you say that you don't see any direct threat from JN to the United States. I would ask if the others if that is their consensus and is the main threat from foreign fighters and also are any of you aware of any support or any elements of this country who would support a Syrian al-Qaeda movement?

Is there anything, any community in this country or any elements of support, for Syria al-Qaeda or JN in particular other than people just maybe radicalized generally, any particular support in this country for JN?

Mr. BARFI. We haven't seen any incidences of this in the Muslim communities in America. As you know, most almost if not all the community here is moderate.

We have not had the same radicalization problems as you have in Britain and to a lesser extent France and in the period since 9/11, you have seen several attacks in—you have seen the bombing, the London bombings, the Madrid bombings and then I think your last year we had this lone wolf in France.

We haven't had that other than the Boston bombing and these were guys who were lone wolf. They were not radicalized in a mosque and this is very important. They didn't go to a mosque. They didn't hear a preacher. There was no networks that followed them to certain places.

They did this all on their own. So there was not a community to give them an infrastructure and the network. That is what is very important about the Boston bombings that we have to take away, sir.

Mr. KING. The main threat then you see from Syria would be the foreign fighters coming back through Europe and the United States, primarily, that should be our main homeland security focus right now. Do you agree with that?

Mr. BARFI. The problem—I am sorry, did you want to—

Mr. KING. Actually, the whole panel and I will end on that and I will go to the—

Mr. BARFI. Then I will let the others handle it.

Mr. JONES. Mr. Chairman, if I could just come in on this. I heard from reliable sources, although I take this with a grain of salt, probably no more than a dozen or so Americans have gone to Syria to fight possibly some with Jabhat al-Nusrah.

That is concerning. The fact that we have had some is of concern. I think especially as the war continues as the Assad regime falls I would expect those numbers to go up rather than down.

It is unclear what they will do when they leave, whether they will come back, whether they will go to North Africa, whether they will die in country, but I think the fact that we do have some

Americans and we don't know the percentage. We know roughly a dozen out of 17, is it a dozen out of 50?

We don't know the percentage of the total mass of fighters that have left the United States. But I would still say the fact that we have some of the facts, that that is probably going to increase because that has been the trend. It's because the war is likely to get worse before it gets better. It is a troubling trend and I don't believe we have the coverage over that as well as we should.

Mr. SIMCOX. In regard to whether Jabhat al-Nusra would look to attack the United States or members of that group coming back, I mean of course it would be—you could never dismiss it. It is an entirely rational and logical thing to fear.

All I would say is that of the plots that have been against the United States and the United Kingdom and I have looked at them all in my research, the people who have attempted to attack the homeland have actually been those who didn't fight but trained in these areas and were then sent back with a very specific operation in mind.

I think there is a couple of reasons why that may be. I think first of all may be in terms of those that are aspiring to attack the homeland now al-Qaeda has more—it doesn't have interest in using them as cannon fodder in local conflicts.

The individuals that can travel back to the homeland and carry out operations are perhaps are of greater value to them than they were before. Maybe some of the individuals who fight in places like Syria but then don't go on to try and attack the homeland, maybe they feel they have done their stint that the time they fight, spend fighting jihadist abroad was their contribution to the overall effort and they don't have the same interest in attacking the homeland.

I mean that is speculation and I think it is worth bearing in mind that we haven't seen a huge amount of people who fought abroad carry out attacks in the homeland.

Briefly on the subject of radicalization in the United States, I mean it is true, there is no doubt about it, that Britain and Western Europe generally has had much greater problem with radicalization, our integration strategy to be frank just doesn't work as well as the American one.

I don't think there is much doubt about that but at the same time in the research that I did recently, 54 percent of individuals who have been convicted in the United States or carried out suicide attacks were American citizens.

So I would encourage that there is not complacency about this issue because even though there aren't the same networks as there are in Europe, there is still problems of radicalization in this country and I think it is one that we should always be wary of.

Mr. JOSCELYN. Just on the question of the potential threat of the Nusra front to the homeland, I just want to interject a couple quick points, which I think it is right as Barak says here that basically most of the Nusra Front is concentrated on fighting locally in the insurgency right now trying to consolidate its hold in inside Syria.

My one interjection to that is to always be careful that al-Qaeda routinely uses these local insurgencies, these local fights, and then basically coalesces them into their global jihad. That is part of their

strategy and given the head of all al-Nusrah front's ties to the head of al-Qaeda, I mean, al-Zawahiri's allegiance to them and various other indications, you can never downplay the possibility that some portion of their assets even it is small compared to the overall effort will be used against us.

I just want to interject one further thought along those lines. We have seen as you have talked about many times, Congressman, about the threat from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen against the homeland.

Well, prior to the Christmas day bomb plot in of December 2009, there was a widespread assumption and I produced it in my testimony here for you, amongst the—in the intelligence community from the NCTC, CIA, NSA, and others of that the AQAP was going to be focused on—they were focused on the threat of terrorist sects in Yemen but were not focused on the possibility of AQAP attacks against the U.S. homeland.

Well, AQAP was waging a local insurgency there in Yemen, still is, trying to consolidate its hold over territory and trying to come back from its getting knocked down and yet during all of that it still managed to come after us.

So I don't know of any specific threats against U.S. homeland right now from the Nusrah front, I am just saying that we shouldn't assume that—including—when you have guys like I mentioned before senior al-Qaeda talent now back in the game in Syria, we shouldn't assume that they won't think about that at some point in time.

Mr. KING. I have gone way over. We are coming back for a second round.

I would just say, Mr. Barfi, I am not certain yet on the Boston attack. That is still open on whether or not there was any radicalization within Boston. We don't know. We have gotten some other reports, but again, it is too preliminary. I wouldn't rule it out, that is all I am saying at this stage.

With that, I would recognize the very patient Ranking Member, Mr. Higgins, for as much time as he wants.

Mr. HIGGINS. No, I enjoyed it.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to ask unanimous consent for the gentlelady from Texas to sit for the purpose of questioning and receiving testimony.

Mr. KING. Without objection.

Mr. HIGGINS. We know from the 9/11 report that senior al-Qaeda figures maintain close ties to Iranian security officials and had frequently traveled across Iran's border.

At least 8 of the 14 Saudi operatives selected for 9/11 operations traveled through Iran in the months before the attack. In recent years, Iran's ties to al-Qaeda has increased. In 2010, Iran reportedly began releasing detained al-Qaeda operatives.

Furthermore, as many as 20 members of the bin Laden family have lived in the compound in Iran since September 11, 2001, while bin Laden's son and high-ranking advisors to his father have been able to easily slip in and out of the country.

When the terrorists' train plot was thwarted before it was executed in Canada, Iran's foreign minister spokesman stated that there was no firm evidence of any Iranian involvement and groups

such as al-Qaeda have no compatibility with Iran in both political and ideological fields.

Well, I don't believe the foreign minister spokesperson. I don't believe the foreign minister. I don't believe the Iranian president, Ahmadinejad because they have a mutual enemy and it is us and Westerners.

We need just to look at 9/11 and the death and destruction that was exacted on the United States in New York City, the murder of John Granville, a United States Agency for International Development Diplomat, in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum in 2009. He was targeted for one reason because he was an American and he was a Westerner. The thwarted a New York City subway plot in 2009 and most recently the Canadian train plot.

You know, we are asking the question rhetorically in this committee as to whether or not al-Qaeda operatives pose any threat to the United States. I think we should get beyond the question and just insert the way it should be. The answer is yes.

The question is: How imminent is that threat? In previous hearings—we had a hearing here about the Hezbollah presence which you know, acts as a proxy for Iran, Syria, and Venezuela, a violent jihadist group had a presence in Latin America.

But in the hearing, it was disclosed that they also have a presence in 15 American cities and four major cities in Canada. We were told that we shouldn't be too concerned because that terrorist activity was limited to fundraising.

Well, if you are a terrorist organization bent on destruction of Israel and the West and you are raising money, I don't see the distinction between raising money and actual terrorist plots because that money presumably is used to finance the terrorist plots that are directed at us.

So I would just like to try to again, get beyond the pleasantries and the, you know, the subtleties of, you know, of whether or not al-Qaeda poses any threat and that is just to accept that they do and let's talk honestly and directly about how imminent that threat is.

See, al-Qaeda is an organization much like Nazi Germany. You know, Nazis swore a personal oath to Adolf Hitler and it was thought that when he died that it ended. Same is true with al-Qaeda, but the problem is this: The post-bin Laden al-Qaeda is younger, more tech-savvy, more aggressive, and found in places where we previously never thought they were.

Like we found in the investigation regarding the Boston Marathon bombers. So I just like to get beyond, you know, the niceties and let's deal with the black and white, and I would start with Dr. Jones.

Mr. JONES. Very good points, Mr. Higgins.

Briefly I would make two comments. One is, my personal assessment is when one looks at the al-Qaeda threat to the U.S. homeland the most severe threats today are coming from Pakistan, Yemen, and a few other locations.

Not Iran, but on your question about whether the threat is imminent, I have looked carefully over the last several years and written on it, I do think the Iran contingent is significant to monitor.

I would say it is not as imminent as it appears in several other places but I wanted to say a few other things.

One is the fact that they have got Yasin Al Suri in Iranian territory is of concern. He has been involved in al-Qaeda plotting. He is a member of bin Laden's inner Shi'i; he is still there. Yasin Al Suri, Muhsin al Fadhli, and a range of others, these are core al-Qaeda operatives in Iran that does present a threat.

What is in it for Iran? I think the most dangerous prospect frankly from al-Qaeda's contingent in Iran is if there were to be a U.S. or Israeli strike against Iranian interests, that would probably increase my assessment of Iran's interest in using and encouraging Iranian al-Qaeda—proxies in Iran to attack.

My sense is that they have been pretty cautious on this about getting involved, getting al-Qaeda involved in an attack for that very reason, not to encourage—increase the impetus for U.S. or Israeli strike. I think that would be one key issue to watch. A strike or greater tension might trigger Iran to even close its relationship with them.

Just one last point. Again, I do think it is worth noting that there has been some tension between al-Qaeda and Iran on al-Qaeda and Iraq targeting of Shi'i which has been consistent and on the Jabhat al-Nusrah's attacks against Hezbollah and Iranians in Syria.

So there have been tensions. The situation is complex. On your question about whether it is imminent, I would say no, not compared to other cases right now, but situations could change including elevation of the Israeli/U.S. and Iranian conflict which would make it more imminent in my view.

Mr. SIMCOX. I would echo some of—much of Dr. Jones' comments and I think that the severe imminent threats do come from Yemen and Pakistan.

What concerns me though about Iran in comparison to those countries is that we have a good working relationship with the Yemeni government in terms of intelligence sharing and those we target.

Similarly in Pakistan the drone strikes have helped degrade al-Qaeda's operations there. The problem is we don't have that with Iran and we don't—there is too much we don't know I feel about what is going on in Iran to be able to make a completely thorough assessment of how imminent the threat is.

Now I would suggest that the main threat is still from Pakistan and Yemen but I wouldn't say that that is gonna be necessarily the case for the next 5 to 10 years because we know so little about their involvement in Iran, because obviously the relations between the United States and Iran are what they are.

One other thing I would suggest is the interaction between al-Qaeda and Iran is also not—it doesn't necessarily have to be this way. There are opportunities I believe for the West to sow division and Dr. Jones mentioned the al-Qaeda and Iraq and Iranian hatred and I do believe it is a visceral hatred and the fact that in Syria at the moment obviously they are on competing sites.

So extremely complex and not an easy one for the United States to figure out an effective response to, but I think there are both great threats but also potential opportunities.

Mr. JOSCELYN. Well, I come after it from a little bit of a different perspective in that there absolutely are numerous areas where the two are at loggerheads especially in Syria today, Iran and al-Qaeda and elsewhere.

But I think again if you look back at the historical record what comes out over and over again since the early 1990s that these two have been able to come to agreement on areas they can collude.

That is the official position of the Obama administration, which as I said has really paved the way through the Treasury Department and the State Department to expose the current agreement which allows yes, you know, Syrians and others to operate inside Iran.

I just want to read for the record what the Treasury Department said in its October 2012 announcement that says, "Under the terms of the agreements between al-Qaeda and Iran, 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—" this is what the Treasury Department said, "The government of Iran gave the Iran-based al-Qaeda network freedom of operation and the uninhibited ability to travel for extremists in their family.

The threat to the al-Qaeda members there because Iran doesn't want to allow them to do whatever they want to do, they want to have some say in how this all goes is that if al-Qaeda members violate these terms they then run the risk of being detained by Iranian authorities.

So again, this is part of the official U.S. Government record now directly contradicting exactly all of those quotes of the Congressman Higgins read off from the senior Iranian officials.

Just pointing out that the Treasury Department, State Department, the Obama administration have already come out and said what they are saying, the Iranian officials are saying that this is wrong.

One other quick note about al-Qaeda and Iraq, this is where this gets really so complicated. One of the things in all of this is yet absolutely true that Iran and al-Qaeda were on the opposite sides in terms of the killings of Shiites within Iraq and that there is animosity there absolutely.

But look back to February 2012 when the Treasury Department released its second designation of the Iran al-Qaeda relationship. The Treasury Department came out and said specifically that Iran's ministry of intelligence and security actually provided assistance not just for al-Qaeda but also members of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

So they are a very duplicitous bunch who play double games in all these areas and you can't just assume away that differences of opinion are going to prevent collusion.

Mr. BARFI. When we first heard reports that al-Qaeda operatives had moved to Iran, we were basically—analysts were basically puzzled because of the ideological constraints between the two sides.

Al-Qaeda is very Shi'i and the Shi'i grows out of Salafi/Wahhabi theology. The Iranian regime is a Shi'i theocracy, but over time, we have seen that Iran has used al-Qaeda as a tool and we don't know

how far it will go to extend the use of that tool, and will it use it to bleed the West and particularly the United States?

We have seen not only al-Qaeda core operatives active in Iran but we have also had reports that al-Qaeda affiliates have had relations with the Iranians, specifically AQAP. Specifically, a defector said that there was a lot of activity going back and forth between Iran and the organization.

Again we see an ideological problem because we have now reports that the Iranian government is funding the Houthi rebellion in northern Yemen that has led by a Shi'i offshoot. That is much closer to Sunniism than the Shi'i who rule Iran.

So we see ideological problems but we do also see pragmatic understandings or cooperation between the organizations and we will probably see that in the time to come also because there is a lot of senior operatives in al-Qaeda and remember the al-Qaeda core has been decimated in Pakistan but those people in Iran, there is no drones flying over there, so they are not being killed.

Mr. HIGGINS. Just a final thought. On April 22, 1 month ago, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police announced the arrest of two people in connection with plotting a terrorist attack on a passenger train, high-impact target, it travels from Toronto, 90 miles from Buffalo through Niagara Falls, 20 miles from Buffalo, and into New York City, a place that has known the cruel fate of a terrorist attack.

According to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the alleged terrorists were receiving assistance from al-Qaeda elements in Iran.

With all due respect, gentlemen, that to me, is an imminent threat.

I will yield back.

Mr. KING. Oh, I am sorry. Yield back?

Mr. HIGGINS. Yes.

Mr. KING. I now recognize the gentleman from Utah, Mr. Stewart, who as a new Member of the committee has really shown extreme interest in this issue and I commend him for that and I now recognize him for his questioning.

Mr. STEWART. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I speak for many when we recognize that you have been a National leader on this for many years and we appreciate that.

To the witnesses, thank you for being with us today. Thanks for the sacrifice in being here and what you have told us and the expertise that you hold is important and so we appreciate an opportunity to spend a few minutes with you.

Although I have to say it frustrates me just a little bit and I will explain what I mean by that and I don't mean it in a negative way but it illustrates that we live in a complicated world and this is a very complicated part of the world.

It is dangerous, it is unpredictable, and it is frankly hard to sort out the good guys from the bad which is I think you have illustrated and talked about that today. You have JN, FSA, al-Qaeda, you talked about now Westerners who have gone in and joined the fight and that is even more complicated and more difficult when you try to predict the future because the reality is a very dynamic part of the world and that allegiances and loyalties can change and shift quickly and you may not know what the lay of the land is

going to look like tomorrow even let alone a year or several years down the road.

I was a pilot in the Air Force for 14 years. I have I think a general sense of the situation there but not any specific sense and so I want to ask you just very simply are there any rebel groups in Syria right now that you would recommend that we could trust, that we could you know in in any fashion consider an ally to us and sharing values or someone we could have a strategic alliance with, with any degree of comfort?

Mr. BARFI. I was hoping you would ask that question. I spent a lot of time with Lewa Al-Tawhid, it is the biggest rebel group fighting in the province of Aleppo.

I have spent time with the foot soldiers from the villages, I spent time with the leadership. These people are thoroughly nationalists. They are not secular. We have to take the difference between what it means to be secular, nationalist, and jihadist.

These people believe in the Syrian state. They want to fight for an independent Syrian state where they have the freedoms that they want. They don't want to take the fight anywhere else. They don't believe in global jihad. They don't want to fight the Israelis. They just want the regime to leave them alone and have a chance to succeed.

These guys do not speak of radicalism. They are not calling the Alawis heretics. They are trying to build a democratic state where everybody has the freedom and you respect the minorities and these are the types of groups that our intelligence communities needed to vet and get the training and get the arms through because they are the best opportunity to overthrow the regime to strengthen the nationalists at the expense of the jihadists and to instill confidence in the Syrians that the western nations in the international community is doing something for them and that they do not have to turn to the jihadists and Islamists who are the best fighters on the battlefields, sir.

Mr. STEWART. I appreciate you sharing that with us. Let me challenge you just a little if I could and I am not disagreeing with you like just sincerely want to know. We said the same thing about some of the participants in Libya for example or in Egypt and it turned out that they weren't nearly as democratic nor as friendly to the Western ideals as we thought they were at one time. Do you think that might be the case here as well?

Mr. BARFI. Basically the problem you had in Egypt was there was no fighting in Egypt and you moved very quickly. There was no transition. You deposed Hosni Mubarak who was a secular authoritarian leader. He was president for 30 years.

There was not a lot of democracy in Egypt. Elections were rigged. There was a tolerated opposition but they could do nothing. They had no freedoms. So once you had the fall of the regime and the quick elections who could benefit?

Only the Islamists because you can organize in the mosque but you cannot organize in the streets so they had some type of organization. So they were able to win and as we see the problems of Muslim brotherhood.

What happened in Libya is we did not directly arm the militias. What we did is we subcontracted it to the Qataris. The Qataris

had different—and I spent 6 months in Libya during the revolution so I was able to meet with the leaders—the politicians and the military leaders.

What happened is the Qataris did not choose—they don't have the same ideals and ideology as we do. They are playing also to their own domestic constituencies and a lot of their domestic constituencies espouse what we would consider intolerant ideas and intolerant groups, so they funded those militias during the campaigns specifically February 17 brigade which was an Islamic brigade.

We did not work with the defectors, the army defectors who had an army units specifically Asayahiah, which were the special forces under Abdul Fatah Younis who was the interior—he was the interior minister under Kadafi. He participated in the 1969 revolution. He moved up to military ranks.

He knew what a military organization was, and he was assassinated by the Islamists. We never helped them or his people. We never funded them. So we subcontracted. That was the problem there.

If we work directly here in Syria and we are doing the same thing. We are subcontracting with the Qataris and the Saudi's again in Syria. If we deal directly. If we vet directly. If we used our intelligence agencies directly, if they go on the field and see: (A) The capability of these people and (B), what their ideology is we won't have those problems, Mr. Congressman.

Mr. STEWART. Mr. Chairman, do we have some latitude with time then? Yes?

I have a second question I think it will be a little easier to answer but before I do, from other witnesses, do you—is there a consensus among you that this is a group that we can form an alliance with or do you have some hesitation in that?

Mr. JONES. I have some hesitation. I have some hesitation because I think polling done before the war did show that most Syrians do not support al-Qaeda's ideology. That there appears to be pretty good data on that.

But, the one concern I have is hearing from some senior free Syrian army officials that the United States putting Jabhat al-Nusrah on the foreign terrorist organization list was unhelpful and that they actually were playing a role in the opposition was a concerning remark.

Because in that sense that is a very—I see that is a very short-term comment where they can be helpful in overthrowing the regime but again my biggest concern though is Jabhat al-Nusrah is getting stronger and it has a some support from the opposition leadership. That is where I would pause.

Mr. STEWART. Okay. I am going to move on but before you let me just make a quick comment regarding this if I could I mean American—

Mr. KING. I would just say to the gentleman, and don't worry about time. Just ask your questions. Don't worry about it.

Mr. STEWART. Okay. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The American people, by nature, we want to help. When you see, you know, the death among civilians particularly in Syria and I

spent a couple of nights ago with some officials from Tunisia and Egypt and Morocco and Libya, and it was encouraging for me to hear them talk about their revolution.

This wasn't just a change in government. They viewed this as our revolution just like we viewed 1776 as our revolution and that was, I said, encouraging to me, but again I am extraordinarily cautious in forming alliances there or supposing that we can form alliances that it is going to have significant outcome and then wonder what happens in the future, but having said that, let me move on if I could.

Mr. Joscelyn, you have talked, to steal your phrase, you mentioned "creative ways to attack" and I would like to look at that, if we could, you know as devastating as a conventional attack is it certainly a tragedy and it is one that we have to be aware of and guard against in every way, but reality is that there are much more destructive outcomes that could potentially happen to us.

Pakistan has obviously a large number of nuclear weapons. Syria, Iran, and Iraq have possession of, or groups there have perhaps access, to you know other weapons of mass destruction, particularly chemical weapons. I just wondered how you view that threat, the threat of an attack with weapons of mass destruction.

Does it appear to be something that they are aggressively moving towards or is it not—is that too big of an apple for them? Is this something they don't really want to undertake at this time? If you could just share your feelings on, you know, that threat because if that happens of course that is a world-changing event. Any thoughts on that from many of the panel?

Mr. JOSCELYN. Well, I will say this: I don't think, you know, I don't know of any detail or intelligence that they are currently in possession of any kind of weapons like that, but I think you need to take it very seriously the long-standing rhetoric to come out of—

Mr. STEWART. Well, could I interrupt just to clarify. I mean when you say they, you mean some of the rebel groups or terrorists?

Mr. JOSCELYN. Yes, exactly. You were mentioning to me new talk about there is a friend in Syria who clearly has an interest in obtaining the chemical weapons and other weapons there; has already been receiving higher—more heavy armaments from captured bases and the like.

You talk about in Pakistan there is this elaborate game in Pakistan, which is really worth a whole 'nother hearing about how al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups have even attacked nuclear installations as part of their elaborate game to try and sort of free up the security around those arms.

What I would say is I don't know of any intelligence right now that these groups have these weapons. What I would say that I am concerned about is that it is something they talked about now for well more than a decade, that they want to get these weapons.

You talk about—Chairman King mentioned Abu Ghaith earlier who was previously in Iran and then you know was arrested and detained after he left Iran.

One of the things that Abu Ghaith actually spoke about, he was a close spokesman for Osama bin Laden after 9/11, and inside Iran in 2002 he actually spoke openly about the necessity of acquiring

these weapons, and he is only one of many of these al-Qaeda ideologues who talk along these lines.

So part of the downside I would say of taking a hands-off approach for example to Syria or something along those lines is we are not being proactive in trying to figure out a way to prevent them from achieving that goal.

I think Mr. Barfi here said it far better than I could, that basically subcontracting out to others to do this type of work runs all sorts of risks in and of itself.

Mr. STEWART. Yes, anyone else?

Mr. Simcox.

Mr. SIMCOX. Sure, yes. I think that if they—I don't know if they—I mean—I don't believe at the moment I have not seen anything to suggest they do have weapons, al-Qaeda or these affiliated groups, but if they got them, I believe they would use them without a shadow of a doubt.

I mean let's—it is different personalities but the same group: 9/11 killed 3,000. If it was 30, great, from our point of view. I don't see any evidence to suggest that they would hold back.

In terms of and the Syrian question, it is extremely difficult. I guess I would just always return to the point that America's involvement or its lack of it—it won't be thanked either way.

I think America wants to help. It tries to do good. It gets involved in Iraq. It is—by many it is hated for it. It doesn't get involved in Bosnia; by many, it is hated for it. Syria, I think it is going to be the same.

Mr. STEWART. Yes, I would agree with that. Maybe I will just close with this comment.

It is clearly their objective. They would clearly look to have access to those, any weapons of mass destruction, whatever they might be. As that area becomes less and less stable and less and less predictable, I don't think we can imagine what the command and control of those weapons might eventually in whose hands they might reside including Pakistan with their nuclear warheads and one day an event in Pakistan could shift the world as far as how we view that threat.

So with that, Mr. Chairman I back and thank you.

Mr. KING. The gentleman yields back.

The gentlelady from Texas, Ms. Jackson Lee is recognized.

Ms. JACKSON LEE. Let me thank the Chairman of the committee and the Ranking Member and also thank the Chairman and Ranking Member for what have been a series of very instructive and very important hearings on this issue.

Allow me to apologize for not being here at the beginning as we were laying a wreath at the women's war memorial as we approach Memorial Day, which reminds us of the sacrifice of many of the men and women of the United States military in battles of yesteryear and battles of today.

I wanted to ask both Dr. Jones and Dr. Barfi, as I have listened—and Mr. Barfi—as I have listened to the testimony just this question: What preparation should the United States be engaged in on the basis of what we are listening to in terms of what the world is today? Whether we speak of al-Qaeda, whether we speak of others, what should the United States be doing?

Dr. Jones and Mr. Barfi.

Mr. JONES. Very briefly, I think we: (A) Must recognize that there is in my view a growing threat from Salafi jihadist groups that has existed in North Africa and the Levant areas we have talked about through Persia, Iran, and down into South Asia and potentially other areas.

I think as we have seen in a few places like Iraq, large numbers of American forces are probably not the answer. So I think what we are looking at is clandestine units from the Central Intelligence Agency and other U.S. intelligence organizations, U.S. special operations forces that need to be able to do to things as we just talked about on the chemical side, if it becomes clear that Jabhat al-Nusrah has access to chemical weapons.

We need organizations like Delta to be able to go in and seize control over those kinds of materials before or after, ideally before, somebody gets their hands—but I think this is the kind of struggle that we are talking about.

I do think the biggest weakness that we have along these lines is our cutting and funding for a number of years and actually eliminating the U.S. Information Agency which was so effective in combating the Soviet Union's ideology during the Cold War.

I don't think our inner agencies' coordination on pushing back against this ideology is what it should be. I don't think it is funded as well as it should be, and again I don't think it is as coordinated as well as it should be.

Ms. JACKSON LEE. I think that has been very constructive.

Mr. Barfi. Yes, thank you.

Mr. BARFI. The biggest problem, Congresswoman, is that we have a new frontier, a new front in the Arab world, after these Arab Springs. We used to have—we had a long-term working relationships with intelligence agencies in the Middle East specifically with the Egyptians.

We had redlines to Omar Souleyman who headed the intelligence agencies and a great friend of the United States. He was a right-hand man of Mubarak. We no longer have those access and those channels and those lines open.

We need to develop new relationships. In Libya we had a man named, Musa Kusa that we worked with. He defected. He is now sitting in Qatar; hangs out in hotels all day. He is no longer giving us any more information.

So we had to figure out how to get this information. Who is going to tell us what these guys are doing on the ground? There are several ways you can do that. You can either: (A) Develop your own intelligence sources and own contacts on the ground, or you develop new relationships with the organizations.

In Egypt, it is going to be specifically difficult because we have a new front. That is another problem that we have in the Arab Spring. We have these new fronts. We saw what happened in Benghazi. Sinai, Congresswoman, is a big problem. We have seen jihadists gather there not only from Egypt but from other countries. They have already attacked Egyptian soldiers in the desert.

They have already had cross-border raids into Israel and they are using sophisticated weapons. We are not just seeing small

arms. We are seeing surface-to-air missiles that have been smuggled in. These are big problems.

So we need to develop these new relationships with these people. Also, and the problem that with Egypt is: What are you going to do? The Egyptian forces do not have the counterterrorism training.

There is an organization called the Central Security Forces that works in the, in the Sinai Peninsula after the Camp David Accords, these are rejects. These are military rejects. In Egypt you need to have conscription.

These are people that are largely illiterate. They couldn't get into the Armed Forces so they have this outlet into Central Security Forces. So we need to figure out what are we going to do. Are we going to train these guys? Are we going to try to train some new counterterrorism people? Those are the big problems that we have moving forward.

Ms. JACKSON LEE. Thank you.

That is expansive—let me raise the question on the role of the Canadian Mounted Police April 22 and these proposed efforts by individuals that would attack a train that was leaving Toronto going into New York.

Again, obviously as my Chairman has often said, one of the targets that they believe draws the most international attention. I have two questions that I would like to pose to Mr. Simcox and Dr. Jones.

Do you think al-Qaeda is operating in Iran as they turn their head without governmental intervention or support? Do you believe that—in the instance of the April 22 incident that the Iranian government may have known about the incident, proposed incident, and chose to look the other way?

Is this not disturbing, given our relationship with Iran? I think it builds on what Mr. Barfi has indicated about getting new sources and that certainly concerns me, and again, what do you suggest that the United States do in focusing on this relationship with Iran knowing that these operatives are living there but in particular, did they turn their heads and is al-Qaeda living there with complete protection, if you will, because the government looks the other way?

Dr. Jones. And Mr. Simcox.

Mr. JONES. Very good questions. If I understood your two questions correctly, in my assessment in looking at this issue to some degree, the Iranian government is aware of al-Qaeda's role there.

It has been aware from the beginning. It had conversations in Afghanistan before they left in 2001. So yes, they are aware. Yes, they have provided support.

My understanding is they have been a little bit cautious on encouraging external attacks outside of Iran against Western countries.

I was actually suspicious at first of that, there was a connection with this particular Canadian plot that went back to al-Qaeda in Iran. I was wrong. I went back and looked more carefully at this particular situation and there does appear to have been al-Qaeda in Iran involvement in the plot in several respects including operatives along the Iranian Afghanistan border where, it is worth

noting, the United States is downsizing if not withdrawing entirely from Afghanistan.

I have seen no evidence that the Iranian government was involved or aware. It is possible. I have seen in talking extensively with a range of peoples who should know. I have seen no evidence that they were aware. I would be surprised if the Iranian government was involved in the attack.

Again, I don't know whether they were aware—they are monitoring these people very closely. It is certainly possible that they saw something along these lines. Again, they are monitoring them. I think in terms of what to do—look, I think the Iranian government needs to be pressured to get rid of these guys; return them to their home countries.

They do appear—and they don't like a public discussion along these lines. I think the more we talk about this in forums like this, the more pressure it puts them on because I think most Shi'i are not going to be happy with an al-Qaeda Sunni presence in Iran—in Iran, not something I think they are going to want more talk about publicly. So I encourage her questions along these lines because I do think it makes them uncomfortable.

Ms. JACKSON LEE. Mr. Simcox.

Mr. SIMCOX. I certainly believe that al-Qaeda is operating in Iran. I think Iran certainly knows the whereabouts of these individuals. I think there is a support that is going on between the two.

It has been a—Iran has been a safe haven almost for some of these individuals that went there after the fall of the Taliban in the immediate post-9/11 world.

My sense is that the Iranian government—I also haven't seen evidence to suggest the Iranian government was involved in the Canadian plot. I would also suggest that they would have to be—to get involved in that kind of planning and the attention it would bring would be a grave strategic mistake on their part.

Now that doesn't mean they haven't made a grave strategic mistake, it is entirely possible. But I would be a little bit skeptical to suggest they knew about it. It is possible they didn't look the other way, but in terms of actual operational involvement, I am a little more skeptical.

I would suggest that if they did know, it was more about letting it happen as opposed to actively forcing it. In terms of the United States—what the United States can do with Iran, I don't see a whole host of great options here, because the United States has reached out to Iran very, very publicly under the Obama administration especially after he had just been elected, this hasn't been reciprocated in any way shape or form as far as I can tell by the Iranian government.

My sense is that they—the presence of al-Qaeda operatives on their soil is something they see as a potentially useful bargaining chip down the line in terms of any negotiations that may be going on with, for example, the Iranian nuclear program.

So that is essentially how I see it but I certainly think there is going to be—there is no reason at the moment for Iran to rein in the activities of al-Qaeda and that seems to me to be quite a big problem.

Ms. JACKSON LEE. If the Chairman would allow me one last question, I would appreciate it. Thank you very much.

I will pose it to Dr. Jones and Mr. Barfi if some others want to comment. Does Syria have—let me ask the obvious—chemical warfare capacity? But will Dr. Assad use it and what other elements in Syria might use or might have access to these chemical weapons?

Dr. Jones, and if someone else wants to comment.

Thank you very much. I will just conclude as I am listening to your answer is that sometimes people would argue that information is a negative element.

I frankly believe that we are now poised with what is happened at the Boston Marathon to not turn any moment to get information and to act and react, or to act proactively than right now, and so I thank the Chairman for this hearing.

But would you please—

Mr. JONES. Yes. I think the answer to your question is the Syrian government does have access, does have stockpiles of especially chemical materials. It has likely used to them in some capacity and I suspect as long as it stays a danger, will have an impetus to potentially use them.

I think if one looks at the involvement of Jabhat al-Nusrah and other organizations in seizing control of the al-Jara airbase, of dam facilities, of an Air Force base in Iblib, and a number of other locations, assuming the Syrian regime does collapse eventually, I think there is a decent likelihood that this material will not be secured and organizations that are in the opposition may have the ability to control it.

So I think there is a very serious danger of this material getting outside of the government's hands and potentially outside of other states-in-the-regions' hands. This I would say is a very serious—I have already heard some potential indications of some opposition groups essentially getting their hands on small amounts of chemical material, which is a very disturbing.

Mr. BARFI. So the problem with Syria is it has, I think, the third or fourth largest arsenal of chemical weapons in the world. Basically, the president's father, Bashar's father, Hafez, created this as a turn against an Israeli first strike. It was not supposed to be used in offensive capacity.

Now that the regime is under is under threat and may lose power, we have seen the regime and resort to small uses of it as it increases its use of its weapons of its arsenal, it has gotten to the point where it has used its most lethal ones, chemical weapons, in very small amounts.

I think we will see it because if there is no response to an international community, there is no reason to believe that the regime will not increase its use of the weapons on more wide-scale levels that will result in higher levels of civilian casualties.

The problem with the weapons falling outside the control of the regime is it is a very hard if you don't have expertise in these weapons to use them. It is not like MacGyver, the A Team, you mix a couple of substances and you are going to be able to use it.

The problem is: How are you going to deliver it? What are you going to put it on? These people cannot put these weapons on a

rocket. You need very sophisticated people and it is not something that you can learn on the internet like the Boston bombers how to build a bomb in the kitchen of your mom.

You need experts in that and we don't see that these people have those experts at this time. They would love to get their hands on these weapons but they would—even if they did, they wouldn't know how to use them and they would see casualties on their own side before they were even able to to put these into play.

Ms. JACKSON LEE. Let me thank all the witnesses.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. KING. The gentlelady yields back.

I just have a few follow-up questions.

Mr. Joscelyn, to give bipartisan credit, throughout your statement you seem to give the Obama administration credit for both the State Department and the Treasury Department for recognizing and focusing in on the threat of al-Qaeda and Iran. Is there anything else you think the administration should be doing that it is not regarding the al-Qaeda elements in Iran?

Mr. JOSCELYN. You know, it is tough to say. Seth here mentioned that sunlight in asking these questions plays a big role and I totally agree with that.

As a result of the Treasury Department designating Yasin Al Suri as the head of al-Qaeda's network in Iran, he was basically sidelined and what they did was they allowed Muhsin al Fadhli who was the current head of al-Qaeda and Iran to come out of prison to take over the network.

So that sunlight I think that Seth is mentioning has direct effects on their behavior. So the more you expose the facts of what is going on, the better it is.

I just want to interject one quick thing on the idea of the Canada plots and whether or not Iranian officials were involved. Like the other witnesses, I haven't seen any specific evidence saying that any Iranian officials were involved.

My only hesitation is I don't think we really know one way or another and part of the reason for that is the way the Treasury Department has described the agreement between Iran and al-Qaeda, it says explicitly that al-Qaeda must keep Iranian authorities informed of their activities otherwise if they violate these terms they run the risk of being detained by Iranian authorities.

I don't know the answer to this question, in the wake of the Canada plots, I don't know of any al-Qaeda operatives inside Iran who were detained or arrested. Maybe some were, I don't know of any and I think that would be indicative one way or another of either tacitly turning a blind eye and approving of something like that or possibly just, you know, basically looking the other way as the Congresswoman asked.

The other thing I would say about that is that where one of these platters went for training and to meet in Zahadan Eastern Iran is also a major hub for the Iranian Quds Force. The RGC Quds Force.

They traffic drugs through there. They traffic arms through there illicitly. It is basically crawling with Quds Force operatives who report right up to the regime.

It is one of those towns—Zahadan is one of those towns where the collusion between these various parties is quite evident. So I

don't know the answer to that question whether Iranian authorities were involved in the Canada plots either, I just say that there are good reasons to actually keep pressing the inquiry.

Mr. KING. With the apprehension of bin Laden's son-in-law, I know the questioning was stopped after I think 22 hours, but what is the potential do you see from him from obtaining information about the al-Qaeda presence in Iran?

How close was he once he was in Iran? How much access do you think he would have had to knowledge as to what the true relationship is? The complexity of the relationship?

Mr. JOSCELYN. I think it is a good question. I think you can have quite a bit.

I mean, here is the complexity of all of this, right? What happens after 9/11 is that Abu Ghaith turns into this chief spokesman for bin Laden. He sitting next to him within days of the plot on a video, right? Days of the 9/11 attack on a video.

He then, some time in early 2002 according to press reporting, flees into Iran. Now I have previously reported and I have put together a string of facts of what he did inside of Iran in 2002 including threatening the United States, including a cell that he was tied to in an attack on U.S. Marines in the Failaka Islands off of Kuwait.

There is a whole string of things that were tied to him basically as he is on Iranian soil in 2002. Then in 2003 he is placed under house arrest. Basically I think the Iranians were spooked by a number of things; one were these international plots were tied to al-Qaeda's Iranian presence where there were complaints from the Saudi's and U.S. Government, back to Seth's point, the transparency and sunshine does have an effect on their behavior.

So he and others are put under house arrest. Now here is where this just turns again is that we know from the Treasury Department that by 2005 the Iranians had now cut a deal with other al-Qaeda operatives to allow them to freely operate inside Iran and some of those operatives include guys who were tied to Abu Ghaith.

So I would say the unpacking all of this in figuring out what he knows about all of this is crucial for kind of understanding—he is one of few eyewitnesses that we would have in custody that actually could tell us how all of this unfolded and sort of the double game and the sort of inconsistent behaviors people have seen of the Iranian regime toward all of this.

Mr. KING. Dr. Jones.

Mr. JONES. Mr. Chairman, if I could just make one remark. My understanding of the lay down in Iran is that there is some compartmentalization of individuals that have been under house arrest so I do think the interrogation can be quite useful.

It won't give a big—a complete picture of the relationship with Iran because I do think it is somewhat compartmentalized, but it will give a portion.

You know, there are other places where there would be useful access to information. The bin Laden documents I understand that have still not been released have plenty of information about al-Qaeda's involvement in Iran and vice versa. Whether that gets released or not is obviously administration decision.

Mr. JOSCELYN. I totally agree with that. I would urge transparency as much as possible with the bin Laden documents. As I have reported, hundreds of thousands of documents and files were recovered during the May 2011 raid in Abbottabad.

The administration has released a grand total of 17 of them out of hundreds of thousands. This was announced in a speech at the Wilson Center by current CIA director John Brennan. Ironically enough, he was promoting transparency on behalf of the Obama administration and government.

I think we can hold them to that and say if you really want to be transparent, you should release as many of these documents as possible including all documents, not just some, all documents dealing with Iran's collusion with al-Qaeda.

Mr. KING. Thank you.

Mr. Barfi, this will be my final question and Mr. Barfi and any of you can comment on it.

Assuming we can't find a group in Syria that can be trusted that we feel is no jihadist threat, and we supply them with weapons, and Assad is overthrown, at the end of the day, is JN though the one best place to take over that movement in order to have a successful revolution, have elements at least reasonably favorable to the West, bring that about, but then have JN take over the revolution?

Mr. BARFI. The problem there, Congressman, is that JN has a strategic vision of not what it wants to do right now in the revolution, but it wants to do in the day after.

It knows that the big fight is not now against Assad, it is what the future of Syria is. So what are they doing? They are taking over infrastructure.

They have taken over the grains, the granaries. So they have grain supply so they can bring the bread to win over the confidence of the people; the hearts and the minds.

They control strategic roads and access points in Syria that link certain very important areas when you need to bring final fighters and you need to bring final provisions in.

You take control of the oil installation in the northeast. They are controlling all of this infrastructure, and they can squeeze people for things that they want later on.

What will likely happen after the fall of the regime is we will see local warlords pop up in certain regions. It will be very cantanized in Syria; focused on cities. There will be five brigades fighting for al-Ethel. Another six fighting for Hama and Homs. This is the way the revolution will play out, these warlords will fight each other.

What needs to be done is that JN cannot sit on the sidelines, hide the weapons—this is another problem is JN—and this is, I know from talking to people who have raided bases with them. They are very good—they are put in charge sometimes in dividing the spoils.

So they get the first choice of what they want when they take a base and they get the weaponry. So they have all these things. So the problem is the day after. What does JN do?

Does JN sit on the sidelines and watch these nationalist brigades fight amongst themselves while it strengthens itself, it strengthens

its ties to the community?—and you have to understand, Congressman, JN is very, very popular.

I was in Zelepos when they were designated terrorist organization in the front of al-Qaeda in Iran, and a lot of people asked me why did America do this? Why does America hate JN so much? You have to understand their popularity is very high and it is not because people like al-Qaeda.

They are not talking about other ideology. They are talking about what they do for society. Every day people line up at the entrance to JN's headquarters and ask them for help in solving problems and they do it in an organized way. So that is something we have to worry about.

So, the day after these brigades are going to fight amongst themselves. What is JN going to do? Are they going to stand on the sidelines? Is it going to throw its weight with certain brigades?

What needs to be done and what we need to encourage is the day after these brigades turn on JN first and then they solve their problems. They weaken JN before they weaken themselves and that is what we need to focus on.

Mr. KING. Would they be willing to consolidate their position against JN or would each be like an individual warlord unwilling to share? In other words, can there be that sense of coordination among the other elements?

Mr. BARFI. You need to use your leverage. If you are funding certain brigades, if you are the United States and you are funneling aid in weapons to certain brigades, you then have influence over them and you can use that influence to achieve your goals.

If you are not playing the game with people, there is no reason for them to help you. So if we can fund the strike brigades and we tell them we want X, Y, and Z and you take a hands-off approach and see—we don't get involved too many cooks in the broth there—you can get the goals that you want. You can achieve that saying hey, the day after this is what you should do to worry about what you need.

Mr. KING. I have to watch what I say, but let me ask you. Do you think we are asserting that now? Are we paving the way to assert that or are we just dealing through subcontractors? We can't do it through Qatar.

Mr. BARFI. Yes, I think that we need to get more directly involved at this point in time. Look, nobody wants to send our boys overseas to put them in harm's way. We want to focus on rebuilding the homeland after all these years where our forces have been away, but we need to deny al-Qaeda a new safe haven.

They are on the run in Pakistan. They are on the run in Yemen. Why give them a new opportunity in the heart of the Arab world? You have got to keep them on the run and we need to deny them that. That is why we need to get more involved at this point in time, and if we don't, we will have this haven and we will have other actors that aren't our friends being involved funneling aid to the wrong organizations.

Mr. KING. I think we are on the same page.

Anybody else want to comment on that?

Okay.

Well, let me thank all of the witnesses. This has really been a very illuminating hearing. I want to thank all of you for your expertise over the years and for sharing it with us today.

Members of the committee may have some additional questions for you and we will ask you to respond to these in writing and probably the only negative part of this is because you have always performed so well, we may ask you back again and tie up some more of your time, but thank you very much.

And without objection, the committee stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:49 a.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

