

**NEAR EAST SOUTH ASIA CENTER FOR STRATEGIC
STUDIES**

David W. Barno
Lt. General, USA (Ret.)
Director

**House Committee on Homeland Security Subcommittee on
Intelligence, Information Sharing, and Terrorism Risk
Assessment**

November 19, 2009

**Testimony for House Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Intelligence, Information Sharing, and
Terrorism Risk Assessment.**

Re-Assessing the Evolving al-Qaeda Threat to the Homeland

David W. Barno, Lt. General, USA (Ret.)

(Remarks reflect my personal opinions and do not represent the US Department of Defense or the National Defense University)

The events of 9-11 reminded us in no uncertain terms of the costs of unpreparedness in what we now term “homeland security.” Just eight years ago, our nation suffered its most serious blow ever delivered by a single outside attacker on the continental United States – an attack that cost nearly three thousand American lives. All of our lives were changed forever, and none of us have ever looked at the defense of the United States in quite the same way since.

Prior to 9-11, the United States had no Department of Homeland Security, and the very idea of defending against threats within the United States fell on the one side to local, state and national policing agencies, up to and including the FBI – and on the other side toward the Department of Defense in its domestic “military Support to Civil Authorities” responsibilities – most commonly disaster assistance. The very idea of an organized foreign group such as al Qaeda possessing the will and wherewithal to conduct a major attack within the U.S. was simply not fully comprehended.

Our model for dealing with threats to the United States in some ways was organized on two very different lines: threats from individuals were addressed as “rule of law” issues and dealt with largely as legal responses to criminal enterprises. Organizations aimed against these threats were by and large law enforcement

agencies, to include international organizations such as Interpol. In the world before 9-11, terrorism largely fell into this model – events ranging from the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993 to the Khobar towers attacks in 1996 to the attack on the USS Cole in 2000. On the other hand, threats from nation-states were seen in the purview of international law and international bodies such as the U.N. and deterred and responded to through largely diplomatic, and if required, ultimately military means. Almost every nation worldwide maintained both intelligence and military organizations purpose-built to defend against these familiar threats. Armies, navies and air forces could be found in all but the poorest countries, and intelligence organizations aimed at neighbors and internal security threats in most countries around the globe.

Non-state actors such as al Qaeda have forever changed this threat model – and the world's law enforcement, military and intelligence agencies have continued to scramble to keep up with this new threat profile. It has become common to measure threat over the last few centuries by the amount of destructive power than can be wrought by ten men (or women). During the 1800s and early 1900s, this potential might play out most often in assassinations of key figures creating strategic turmoil – the lone Sarajevo gunman's impact on the start of World War I as a case in point. The ready availability of mass destructive technology in the aftermath of World War II began to change that equation. The world-changing impact of the internet – both for the unfettered spread of the most deadly technologies as well as ideological radicalization – is now unmatched by any previous development in human history in giving vast destructive power to even a few committed individuals.

In today's environment, the emergence of violent, ideologically driven non-state actors such as al Qaeda have radically altered the calculus of national defense. Conventional military organizations hold little defensive or deterrent power in this model. Law enforcement organizations are similarly demonstrating grave

difficulties in addressing these deadly threats – or doing so in a timely manner, before attacks have occurred. Moreover, the adversary only has to be lucky once – our defensive and preventive measures have to be effective - -100% of the time to prevent potential catastrophe.

Non-state actors present the dual challenge of attribution and accountability for their acts. The perpetrators of the Khobar Towers attack in Saudi Arabia remained obscure for years, effectively dulling any prospects for a timely and effective response. When a weapon of mass destruction detonates in today's world, who will be held responsible? How many month or years will it take to establish attribution to a certain group or individual? To then hold that perpetrator accountable? And are there any prospects for any type of deterrence in a non-state threat world where there is no “smoking gun” for sometimes years thereafter.

This ambiguity inherent in a world of non-state threats -- and a world where states employ the tactics of non-state anonymity to carry out campaigns of terrorism or irregular warfare – argues for both a defensive and an offensive set of tools. Defensive measures will include hardening of potential targets, “red teaming” of vulnerabilities, and even increased vigilance by citizens as well as law enforcement - -all necessary but not fully sufficient. Offensive measures to keep terrorist organizations and other malign non-state actors off balance and under pressure are simply essential.

One can argue persuasively that one contributing factor to al Qaeda's success in the most deadly surprise attack on the United States homeland in our history was its unmolested safe haven in Afghanistan in the years leading up to 9-11. This sanctuary can re-emerge in the same region today, and not require an entire nation-state in order to return to its former prominence and lethality. The Afghan-Pakistan border areas are the nexus of al Qaeda today and cannot be allowed to resume their former position as a quiet

backwater for al Qaeda to plot destruction on the U.S. and our allies unchallenged by western arms.

Defeating al Qaeda in my view will require a long-term American presence in support of Afghanistan and its key neighbor Pakistan. That presence will ultimately not be realized by large numbers of U.S. and NATO troops as is the case today, but by American presence and partnership in intelligence, law enforcement, border control and counter-terrorism forces across the region. However, in my judgment this day will never arrive unless the currently ascendant Taliban threat is defeated and our actual and potential allies across the region buttressed by our success. We must characterize our “end game” in the region not as withdrawal, but as a long term partnership with like-minded nations across this key arc of concern – nations united in the face of a growing menace from non-state terrorists that include al Qaeda. I see the relationship between the Taliban and al Qaeda as absolutely symbiotic: the al Qaeda fish today swim in a Taliban sea in Afghanistan, Pakistan and in the border region writ large. Any strategy that the U.S. undertakes which is focused first and foremost on “exit” as the strategy rather than on “success” in meeting policy objectives is a strategy doomed to fail. This is a paradox – a focus on “exit” undermines the very strategy it seeks to achieve.

I share the belief with many others that only our consistent and persistent military and intelligence pressure on al Qaeda enabled by our local presence and contacts have prevented al Qaeda from striking the United States once again in the last eight years. Returning to an “offshore” posture to fight this threat returns us to the wholly ineffective posture of the 1990s, and removes the immense pressure felt by al Qaeda over the last eight years of what has truly been a “war” on terrorism waged by a broad collection of nations around the globe. This fight must continue, and it will be made immeasurably harder if it is no longer enabled by the close

up presence of American capabilities in Afghanistan and shared efforts across the border in Pakistan.

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before the sub-committee, and I look forward to hearing your questions.