

**Statement before the House Armed Services Committee Terrorism,
Unconventional Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee**

***“COUNTERTERRORISM WITHIN THE AFGHANISTAN
COUNTERINSURGENCY”***

A Statement by

Rick “Ozzie” Nelson

Senior Fellow, International Security Program
Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

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Rayburn House Office Building

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Miller, distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss this important topic.

I come to you today as a recently retired Navy Officer who has spent most of the last decade focusing on the challenges of combating global terrorism, including assignments at the National Counterterrorism Center and National Security Council. In April, I returned from a tour of duty in Afghanistan, where I was director of a Joint Task Force in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. During the next few minutes, I plan to discuss the threats posed by al Qaeda and other terrorist groups—and how they should figure in debates over U.S. and NATO strategy in South Asia.

It can be difficult to assess the current state of al Qaeda and other globally-focused terrorist organizations. We're told that Afghanistan has fewer than 100 al Qaeda operatives, but that the failure of the Afghan government will lead to the group's inevitable return to the state. The director of the National Counterterrorism Center reports that al Qaeda's haven in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) is shrinking, yet militants there—including al Qaeda—have launched a spate of attacks in Pakistan over the last three weeks. And descriptions of al Qaeda's crisis of leadership are tempered by revelations of a suspected jihadist cell in New York.

Here is what we do know: al Qaeda remains intent on attacking the U.S. and our friends and allies across the globe. The organization maintains transnational reach, but is rooted in Pakistan's semi-governed tribal areas. As Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, noted recently, any al Qaeda attack on the U.S. is likely to emerge from the FATA. On a more immediate level, al Qaeda operatives in northwestern Pakistan are believed to have teamed with other militant groups, including Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP), in recent attacks in Pakistan and India.

Al Qaeda off-shoots remain active beyond South Asia. Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) gained notoriety for its brutality during the early years of the Iraq War. While its influence has subsided since the Sunni Awakenings, AQI still threatens regional stability in the Middle East.

Of increasing concern are several al Qaeda-associated groups in North Africa, Southeast Asia, Yemen, and Somalia. The case of Somalia, like Pakistan, highlights the dangers posed by collaboration among different extremist groups. In recent testimony before the Senate Homeland Security Committee, FBI Director Robert Mueller suggested that the Somali insurgent group al-Shabaab has grown close to al Qaeda. This development has helped propel al-Shabaab, originally a Somali-focused insurgency, into a terrorist organization with global reach—including contacts in the U.S.

This trend is illustrated by the recently uncovered plot to recruit Minnesota-based Somali immigrants to fight with al-Shabaab. Along these same lines, officials in September arrested three Afghan citizens—and U.S. legal residents—on charges of lying in a matter involving terrorism. The key figure in these arrests, Najibullah Zazi, is believed to have been planning explosives attacks in New York after receiving training at an al Qaeda camp in Pakistan in 2008.

While these developments represent an expansion and “flattening” of al Qaeda’s global scope, they should not be taken to minimize the continued importance of the group’s senior leadership, including Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri. On a functional level, these men remain active, most likely in Pakistan’s semi-governed tribal areas. On a larger, more symbolic level, they drive al Qaeda’s agenda by inspiring future jihadists and by reminding everyone—including U.S. officials—of their organization’s resilience. Successfully combating al Qaeda ultimately will require puncturing the group’s “cult of personality” by capturing or killing senior leaders particularly bin Laden and Zawahiri.

What I have tried to do in this brief overview is to show that al Qaeda—despite certain setbacks—remains global in scale and determined to attack the U.S. The epicenter of its power lies in Pakistan’s semi-governed tribal areas. It is important to appreciate how this fact relates to our approach in Afghanistan.

We should recall that the U.S. invaded Afghanistan to defeat al Qaeda. But, ask foreign policy analysts why U.S. and NATO forces remain in Afghanistan today, and you are likely to receive a flurry of different responses. Defeating the Taliban; stabilizing and rebuilding Afghanistan; and maintaining American credibility are just a few of the several reasons given—in addition to counterterrorism—for our continued presence in the country.

These are all laudable goals, but the White House must ensure that combating global terrorism generally—and al Qaeda specifically—remains its strategic “anchor” in Afghanistan.

Framing American interests in this fashion will lead us to ask important questions of the various strategies now being debated. I will conclude by posing just one question: what effect would additional troops in Afghanistan have on the stability of Pakistan? After September 11, American troops and our allies essentially pushed extremists out of Afghanistan and into Pakistan, which heightened terrorist activity in northwestern Pakistan. Over the last year, in particular, we have seen a mix of al Qaeda, TTP, and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) militants strike large Pakistani cities and military facilities with increasing frequency. Meanwhile, the FATA haven serves as the primary base for al Qaeda’s global terrorist agenda. These developments are troubling not just because they endanger a nuclear-armed regime, but because the U.S. is largely powerless to combat the threat without Pakistani support.

Fortunately, Pakistan’s military has just begun a 30,000-troop assault on al Qaeda- and Taliban-controlled territory in South Waziristan—the type of campaign that U.S. policymakers have long sought. As Pakistan confronts extremism in its northwest, we must be careful to ensure that any U.S. troop increases do not push insurgents in Afghanistan across the border. This would effectively heighten extremist activity in the FATA and make Islamabad’s mission even more difficult. In the end, any regional strategy which shores up Afghanistan while destabilizing Pakistan will detract from our goals of combating terrorism.

I would be happy to elaborate on this and other issues during questions. Thank you, again, for inviting me to speak today, and I look forward to your questions.