

U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Chairman John F. Kerry
Opening Statement For Hearing On Confronting Al-Qaeda
October 7, 2009

Kerry Opening Statement At Hearing on Confronting Al-Qaeda
Marking The 9th Year Of The War In Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, D.C.-- Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry (D-MA) delivered the following opening statement at the hearing titled "Confronting Al-Qaeda: Understanding the Threat in Afghanistan and Beyond".

Full text as delivered is below:

We come together today, on -- by happenstance on the exact eighth anniversary of our entry -- ninth anniversary, really. We begin the ninth year of the war in Afghanistan -- ninth year. If my memory serves me right, I think the war in Vietnam was 10 years, and it was the longest war in American history.

So we are obviously in a very different kind of war from that, but 869 Americans have died in Operation Enduring Freedom, 220 of our British allies, and 357 from other allied nations, and unknown numbers, obviously, of civilian casualties and of collateral damage.

So this is an important time for us to be reevaluating our strategy as we go forward. And I believe -- Senator Lugar and I and others, yesterday, came out of the White House meeting and made very clear our sense that it is appropriate to be determining the best strategy, the best way forward. Before you start committing X amount of dollars, X amount of troops, you've got to know exactly what you're trying to achieve and what is achievable.

This is also part of a larger challenge to all of us, which is the nature of this ongoing struggle against violent religious extremism, violent radicalized ideology, people who don't hesitate to take civilian lives, sometimes for the most nihilistic of rationales.

In fact, sometimes it's really hard to even wrap some kind of a legitimate description of the rationale around some of these acts. But this is the world we live in today.

And what we're going to try to do today is to consider the threat posed by Al Qaida, specifically, in Afghanistan, Pakistan and beyond, and to understand the progress that has been made toward our goal of disrupting, dismantling and defeating the terrorist organization that attacked us on September 11th.

This was and is, as everybody knows, at the center of President Bush's strategy in taking us into Afghanistan originally, together with the consent of the unanimous United States Congress -- I think it was nearly unanimous -- as well as critical to understanding what our mission should be as we go forward.

This hearing takes place -- obviously, in the center of this backdrop of a significant national debate over the future of American policy toward Afghanistan. And I say significant because, folks, what we decide to do, what the president decides to do, and what, hopefully, we decide to do, either in consent or dissent, will be critical to the amounts of money that we ask Americans to pay over a long period of time, and, much more significantly, in the light of what I said about those lives lost, very significant in the context of the numbers of Americans who will be called on to go abroad and into harm's way and potentially give their lives in furtherance of that policy.

So it's important to us to get this right, because I dare say, we've been down the road before where a year and a half, two years, five years later, we wind up a nation deeply divided and debating after the fact why we don't like being where we are or how we got there. So this is the time, and the stakes are obviously high.

The specter of a reenergized Al Qaida safe haven in Afghanistan, I believe, is real. You have to have several scenarios to make that happen, and we are obviously duty bound to examine those scenarios. And the reality of a worrisome Al Qaida presence in Pakistan is existent and significant in that discussion.

As I've said before, the history of past wars has taught us to question our assumptions at every turn in order to ensure that conventional wisdom doesn't harden into dogma. I've also said, repeatedly, that wars and history don't repeat themselves exactly. There are lessons that you can draw from them and that we should draw from them. But just because something happened a certain way 35, 40 years ago doesn't mean it's going to happen the same way or that the circumstances are the same today.

So we have to be discerning in drawing the similarities, in drawing the distinctions, and of, hopefully, appropriately drawing the right lessons from all of that.

In a series of recent hearings before this committee, we've tried to balance some of these questions. We're not finished at all. But today, we're going to hear about Al Qaida -- specifically about our ongoing efforts against Al Qaida. Also, we're going to hear about our efforts to counter terror in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and how those efforts fit into the larger fight against a global network.

Remember, the Al Qaida that was in a very few countries -- and most specifically in Afghanistan in September of 2001 -- is now an Al Qaida that is in about 58, 59 -- who knows precisely, but we sort of peg it around 60 countries.

It is a global network, which it wasn't. And we also -- we need to look at sort of what our offshore counterterrorism efforts in places like Somalia and Yemen may tell us with respect to what's possible and not possible in Afghanistan or Pakistan; whether there is, in fact, legitimacy to thinking about some kind of a narrower focus, like the one that Al Qaida enjoyed in Afghanistan before 9/11.

When Al Qaida terrorists bombed American embassies in Africa and then attacked us on our own soil, their declaration of war against us was clear. Our response in the (inaudible) sense, while far from perfect, has been forceful and it's been tireless. And it is true that we have severely damaged Al Qaida.

We should acknowledge the enormous debt that we owe to the courageous men and women of our intelligence community who have worked night and day, often without recognition, without adequate thanks, in many cases without anybody knowing who they are, obviously, in order to ensure that the unthinkable doesn't happen again.

And I want to say a word about those real successes that we have had. We have hunted down much of Al Qaida's leadership. We have disrupted terrorist networks in South and East Asia, Europe, and right here in the United States.

And while many Americans have been killed fighting terrorists overseas, we are blessed to note that there has not been an attack on the soil of the United States in eight years.

But let me say a word about that: I remember, and I think many of you do, distinctly how the last administration, particularly the president, the vice president and the secretary of state, reminded us frequently that it was not a question of if, it's a question of when. And all of us need to be so reminded about that reality, notwithstanding the last eight years.

U.S. and the international intelligence officials tell us they've succeeded in recruiting spies inside Al Qaida and around it who have helped us disrupt future attacks. Targeted air strikes and enhanced assistance from allied governments and broadened our reach, and diminished the effectiveness of the Al Qaida network.

Just last week, The Washington Post reported that these tactical advances have led to the deaths of more than a dozen senior figures in Al Qaida and allied groups over the last eight years -- over the past year alone -- excuse me. A U.S. counterterrorism official said that Osama bin Laden and his main lieutenants are isolated and unable to coordinate high-profile attacks.

Now, of course, defeating terrorist networks is more than just killing terrorists and disrupting their operations. In many ways, our efforts to combat terrorism can best be thought of as a global counterinsurgency campaign, where deterring tomorrow's terrorists is every bit as important as killing or disrupting today's.

At its core, this is a battle against the extremists, for the future of people's minds in many different parts of the world. And success will require a comprehensive strategy to address the root causes of terrorism. We must delegitimize terrorists and, obviously, win over the hearts and the minds of those in the Muslim world.

Even as we mark our progress in this endeavor, we are going to have to remain vigilant. We cannot confuse the absence of an attack on our soil for the absence of a threat. The director of national intelligence told Congress that for all of our programs, Al Qaida and its affiliates continue to pose a significant threat to America, and that the group's central leadership has been able to regenerate the core operational capabilities needed to conduct at least small-scale attacks inside the United States.

As our tactics have evolved, so have the terrorists'. Al Qaida and its affiliates have begun hitting softer, Western targets: a subway train in Madrid, buses in London, and the business district in Istanbul. U.S. law enforcement officials remain vigilant against the possibility of attacks against U.S. transportation hubs, tourist attractions, and anywhere that people gather.

Some places, however, are more dangerous today than they have ever been: Yemen and Somalia present two very serious challenges -- fragile societies made even more lawless by the presence of terrorists, trained in camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan -- which is something you have to think about as you think about the policy toward both of those countries.

Morocco and Algeria have suffered attacks by Al Qaida, with dozens of civilians losing their lives. The Philippines faces a daunting challenge from groups allied with Al Qaida seeking to forge an Islamist state in the country's south.

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