

Dick Lugar

U.S. Senator for Indiana

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Opening Statement for Hearing on Confronting Al-Qaeda

U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Republican leader Dick Lugar made the following statement at today's hearing:

As we debate policy in Afghanistan and the merits of our approach to stability in the region, we take this opportunity to explore the broader issues presented by the continuing terrorist threat emanating from al-Qaeda. The Director of National Intelligence, Admiral Dennis Blair, released the National Intelligence Strategy in August. It identified key countries and issues of concern to our national security for the next four years. The report explains that violent extremists “are planning to use terrorism—including the possible use of nuclear weapons or devices if they can acquire them—to attack the United States. Working in a number of regions, these groups aim to derail the rule of law, erode societal order, attack U.S. strategic partners, and otherwise challenge U.S. interests worldwide.”

A loose network of extremist al-Qaeda cohorts has sprung up across the globe. Its affiliates have aligned their actions and rhetoric with the core al-Qaeda leadership in Pakistan to gain notoriety and financing. The largest al-Qaeda affiliate, though greatly diminished, remains al-Qaeda in Iraq. Some of its foreign fighters are returning home to local terrorist branches. For example, a fading domestic Algerian rebel group absorbed fighters from Iraq, expanded its aspirations, and transformed itself into “al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb.” Affiliates of al-Qaeda also emerged in Somalia, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. The Saudi and Yemeni groups recently merged into “al-Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula,” as both accepted fighters returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. These and other extremists well beyond the region are connected to the Pakistan core and its nexus of training, planning, and operations.

Reportedly, al-Qaeda no longer has a major presence in Afghanistan, though witnesses in our previous hearings have indicated that its re-establishment would be nearly inevitable if a Taliban government returned to Kabul. Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, Michael Leiter, testified in the Senate last week that al-Qaeda's core in Pakistan still represents the most dangerous component of the wider network. He stated that our intelligence community assessed that “this core is actively engaged in operational plotting and continues recruiting, training, and transporting operatives, to include individuals from Western Europe and North America.”

In addition, thousands of virtual adherents are connected to al-Qaeda through the internet. These autonomous affiliates exist across Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas. Because of this diversification, eliminating al-Qaeda leadership in Pakistan would not solve the global terrorism problem. But al-Qaeda's leadership continues to be an operational and ideological threat that requires our strongest efforts.

Successes in arresting or killing terrorists and disrupting terrorist plots are essential in keeping the threat at bay, but insufficient for solving the problem. There is a far more enduring undercurrent of finance and ideology fueling terror. Consequently, one of the most important aspects of combating al-Qaeda is the international effort to identify and eliminate its sources of finance. Money is a key ingredient for recruitment of new terrorists and the staging of any large operation. Despite some success in narrowing al-Qaeda's funding options, its financing system has adapted over time. The United States and its allies should be more forceful and vocal about sources of finance for extremist groups. The information might prove disquieting to some friends, but governments must be held accountable for tacitly enabling those who fuel violent extremism.

We also must ask if our current strategy sufficiently accounts for the roles of diplomacy, international exchange, and foreign assistance, so that we can reach Muslims who currently hear a message of hate from their most radical ranks. How do we counter not just al-Qaeda's tactics, but enlist support to discredit his strategic plan and vision within the worldwide Muslim community?

I welcome our witnesses and look forward to their assessments of the current state of the terrorist threat and the effectiveness of U.S. policies to combat it. ###