

Daniel Benjamin
Senior Fellow
International Security Program
Center for Strategic and International Studies
Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
The Changing Face of Terror – A Post 9-11 Assessment.
June 13, 2006

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: I want to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the issue of the evolution of the terrorist threat. With the fifth anniversary of the attacks of September 11 approaching, this is an appropriate moment for reflection on this issue. The terrorist threat we face today is vastly changed from the one that existed on that late summer day. Recent events also point to the necessity of a review of this kind: The killing last week of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi represents a signal achievement in the war on terror – in my view, the most important such blow we have delivered since al Qaeda was run out of Afghanistan in late 2001 and early 2002. But it is exactly this kind of dramatic yet fundamentally tactical achievement that invites misinterpretation of where we are in the struggle against radical Islamist violence. I am therefore pleased that you have scheduled this hearing and others that will follow so that we can try to discern where we stand in this conflict and what needs to be done.

Today, the United States faces an unnerving paradox: For all the tactical successes – the terrorists arrested, plots foiled, networks disrupted – that have been achieved, our strategic position continues to slip. The ideology of jihad is spreading: A new generation of terrorists is emerging with few ties to al Qaeda but a world-view soaked in Osama bin Laden's hatred of the West, and new areas of the globe are increasingly falling under the shadow of this growing threat.

Al Qaeda, of course, still exists, and we would be foolish to assume that the group, however degraded its capabilities may be, will cease to threaten us. Al Qaeda's operatives likely remain the most capable ones in the field. A terrorist organization is not an army, and while an army ceases to be effective once it has lost a certain number of its units, a terrorist group can cause grievous damage if only one or two cells can operate undetected.

It is not necessary to spell out the implications of this further, and I would rather devote the time remaining to what has changed in the last five years. In particular, I would like to address my comments to three new types of terrorists we face and to the changing geography of terror. I do so mindful that we too often try to apply a system of rigid categorization that is inappropriate to the phenomenon of contemporary terror.

The first group that should be noted is the self-starters, also often called "home-grown." We have become familiar with them through such attacks as 2004 bombings in Madrid,

the 2005 bombings in London, murder of Dutch artist Theo van Gogh by a young Dutch Muslim militant also in 2005. These are individuals who may have very little connection to al Qaeda or other preexisting groups, but they have been won over by the ideas of Usama bin Laden and his followers. These terrorists are self-recruited and often self-trained, using the vast wealth of instructional materials available on the Internet. Self-starters have appeared not only in Europe but also in Morocco, where they carried out a string of bombings in Casablanca, and in Pakistan, a country with a well-established jihadist infrastructure which some of the new recruits deemed insufficiently aggressive. It is possible that the string of attacks in Egypt's Sinai peninsula is also the work of self-starters, but we do not have sufficient intelligence at this point to say.

The most recent, and, from an American perspective, most worrisome development is the disruption just this month of a conspiracy involving self-starters in Canada. As has widely been noted, the seventeen people involved sought to acquire three times as much ammonium nitrate as Timothy McVeigh used to destroy the Murrah Building in Oklahoma City. We have in the past too often paid heed to the conspiracies that succeeded and not sufficiently to those that failed. The condition of the Muslim community in Canada is far more like it is in the United States than it is in Europe, and and therefore Toronto carries one powerful message: A self-starter conspiracy on American soil is a real possibility.

It is true that as a group, the self-starters have a less experience and are less skilled than, say, those who have gone through al Qaeda training camps. However, we have seen a significant number of highly educated individuals show up in these cells. If only a small percentage of these groups manage to carry out attacks, we could therefore see a considerable amount of damage and casualties. Moreover, we should not make the mistake of believing that terrorists who begin as self-starters will not find the connections, training and resources they seek. Herein lies the danger of over-emphasizing the new categories, as I mentioned before. Spanish officials have hinted that there was a Zarqawi link to the Madrid bombings. It appears that some of the London bombers traveled to Pakistan for training and evidently some of the Toronto suspects had links to others linked to Zarqawi. We could well see a re-networking of the threat, which could well mean a further increase in the level of danger we face.

Two other groups of terrorists are worth mentioning, both centered in Iraq: The first group consists of the foreign fighters who traveled there to fight against U.S. and coalition forces. Contrary to the expectations voiced by the administration at the outset of the war, those who came to Iraq did not represent the global remnants of al Qaeda after its eviction from Afghanistan. On the contrary, studies by the Israeli expert Reuven Paz and the Saudi scholar Nawaf Obeid both demonstrate that the foreign fighters are overwhelmingly young Muslims with no background in Islamist activism. That is, they represent another pool of the recently radicalized. Although U.S. officials have repeatedly argued over the last three years that the Jordanian-born Zarqawi and his band of foreign fighters represented a very small percentage of the insurgents in Iraq, their violence drove the insurgency – especially the large-scale attacks, such as the attack on

the Golden Mosque in Samarra mosque last February that gave the country a powerful push toward an all-out civil war.

Perhaps with the death of Zarqawi, the threat posed by the foreign fighters in Iraq will be diminished. It is undoubtedly good news that the most capable terrorist operative in the world is no longer on the scene. If reports of numerous raids based on the intelligence that was gathered in recent weeks – including after Zarqawi's death – are true, then perhaps his al Qaeda in Mesopotamia has been dealt a sharp blow, and that would certainly be good news for Iraq. We should recognize, however, that Zarqawi's work in stoking sectarian tension appeared to have run much of its course, and increasing levels of violence demonstrate that plenty of other groups have become active. According to several Western intelligence services, in fact, Zarqawi was turning away new foreign fighters who wanted to come to Iraq. We do not know how many of these foreign fighters remain, or how many have begun to wind their way home. What we can say, however, is that they could become the vanguard of a new generation of jihadists, much as the veterans of the fighting in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s were the founding generation of al Qaeda. For a first intimation of the mind-set these individuals are bringing back to their communities, I commend to Anthony Shadid's story on returnees to the Lebanese city of Tripoli in yesterday's Washington Post.

One last group that deserves attention is comprised of Iraqi jihadists who have emerged from the turmoil of the last three years. In such groups as Ansar al Sunna and the Islamic Army of Iraq there are thousand of militants with a jihadist outlook – according to some reputable sources, there could be more than 15,000 in their ranks.

They will likely have a durable sanctuary in al-Anbar province in western Iraq. US troops have fought repeated campaigns in this region, whether on the Syrian border or in cities such as Ramadi. Yet terrorist attacks have often increased because the militants shrewdly move out of town when troops arrive and return after they depart. They will be rooted out only when there is a capable Iraqi intelligence service. Since that service is likely to be dominated by Shiites and Kurds, there are not going to be many operatives able to work in the hostile environment of al-Anbar.

It is too early to say what the long-term orientation of these Iraqi jihadists will be – will they focus their violence solely on the fledgling regime in Baghdad, or will some of them join the global jihad and seek to export violence beyond their borders? Chances are they will be principally focused on Iraq, but even so, the November 2005 bombings of three hotels in Amman suggest that some will have other targets in mind.

It is true that those attacks were ordered by Zarqawi, but the operatives themselves were Iraqi. The attacks were the first successful ones in Jordan and the most stunning demonstration of the spillover effect of the turmoil in Iraq. Even if relatively small numbers opt for the global fight, it could make a significant difference to the terrorists' capabilities as has been seen by the actions of very small numbers of individuals involved in the Madrid and London bombings.

Some Iraqis doubtless will have motivation for attacks outside Iraq: Although three hotels were hit, there was a fourth bomber – an Iraqi woman named Sajida Mubarak Atrous al-Rishawi, whose device failed to detonate. Afterward, she explained that she had undertaken the suicide mission as an act of vengeance for the deaths of three of her brothers, who had died fighting American forces. Her statement carried a grim suggestion of how the devastation of Iraq may come back to haunt us through the growth of an indigenous Iraqi jihadist movement. The most conservative tallies of Iraqi civilian deaths, which have been compiled by the Iraq Body Count website, puts the toll at around 40,000. We can probably expect more Sajidas in our future.

Let me turn to the issue of the geography of jihad: Here the picture is one of metastasis. I have already mentioned Toronto. Not long ago in Australia, a major dragnet wrapped up at least 18 conspirators who appear to have been plotting an attack on the country's one nuclear power plant. In South Asia – especially in Bangladesh – the incidence of jihadist violence has grown dramatically. In Southeast Asia, a number of regional conflicts in such places as the southern Philippines and southern Thailand continue to raise fears of wider jihadist activity. In the Caucasus, the incidence of jihadist violence continues to be deeply alarming.

Two regions in particular cause great concern. The first is Europe, and I want to thank Senator Allen for allowing me to testify in April on this issue. With more than 30 major failed plots across the continent in roughly five years, Europe has become a central battlefield. Much of Europe's problem owes to the fact that the individual Muslim's identity is sharply tested there. Most of the continent's Muslims arrived in the 1950s and 1960s as workers to fill postwar Europe's labor shortage, and they stayed on in countries that, for the most part, neither expected nor wanted to integrate them into their societies.

It soon became apparent, however, that there was no easy way to send these workers back or to stanch the flow of family members seeking reunification with loved ones – let alone to stop them from having children. As a result, Europe has sleepwalked into an awkward multiculturalism. Its Muslim residents, many of them now citizens, live for the most part in ghetto-like segregation, receive second-rate schooling, suffer much higher unemployment than the general population and those who do work are more likely than their Christian counterparts to have low-wage, dead-end jobs. (For an intimation of the size of the pool of potential recruits, we need only think back to last year's riots in France. The young Muslims who took to the streets were not motivated by jihadist ideology, but they clearly presented an obviously ripe target for recruitment.) It is against this backdrop that we have seen the emergence of many of the self-starter groups as well as the dramatic expansion of a network of operatives associated with Zarqawi. How the Jordanian terrorist's death will affect this network is difficult to predict, but at a minimum, there are now convinced jihadists with terrorist connections in approximately forty countries.

The second area for concern is the Middle East. Contrary to popular belief, radical Islamism had been largely suppressed or wiped out in the regions in the 1990s, but it is now resurgent. We have witnessed a series of bloody attacks in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula,

and there are reports now of al-Qaeda activists in Gaza. Kuwait, a country with no history of jihadist violence, experienced running gun battles between authorities and militants and discovered plotters within its own military. Recent visitors to Lebanon speak of a significant spike in jihadist activity. Syria, a country that waged a campaign of extermination against Islamists in the early 1980s, has seen Sunni radicalism reemerge. Qatar experienced its first vehicle bombing. Saudi Arabia suffered a series of bombings and attacks, and while the authorities have gained the upper hand against al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the group continues to exist. The discovery of Iraqi-style bombs in the kingdom may well be a harbinger of worse to come once veterans of the fighting to the north return home – Saudi Arabia has contributed the largest number of foreign fighters to the Iraqi insurgency. The potential for increasing volatility and destabilization is growing in the region, and that ought to be a cause for great concern.

Why have we seen the overall growth in the threat? The chief reason for this failure is at the level of strategy and it concerns a misunderstanding of the ideological nature of jihadist terror. Although U.S. government officials have often spoken of the terrorists' ideology of hatred, our policies have had the inadvertent effect of confirming for some Muslims the essentials of the bin Laden argument. It is worth reiterating the jihadists' fundamental storyline. At the heart of it is a belief, handed down from the revolutionary Egyptian Islamist writer Sayid Qutb, that the West is the pre-ordained enemy of Islam. In its most barebones formulation, the ideology holds that America and its allies seek to occupy Muslims' lands, steal their oil wealth and destroy their faith. Radical Islamists interpret much of history through this prism: the drawing of borders in the Middle East after World War I was aimed at dividing Muslims and destroying their historic unity. The creation of Israel was another step in this direction since it, too, placed a western foothold in the region and was designed to weaken and subjugate Muslim nations. The U.S. deployment to Saudi Arabia and the invasion of Iraq in Operation Desert Storm marked another stage in this tale of woe. Radical Islamists believe, moreover, that the United States supports the autocrats of the Muslim world as a way of keeping the believers down and undermining the faith.

Thus, through the 2003 invasion of Iraq, we gave the radicals a shot in the arm, handing them a tableau that they could point to as confirmation of their argument. Polling in Muslim nations over the last three years has shown that America's image has plummeted to historic lows. Although most Muslims will not turn to violence, in this environment, it appears that more are turning in that direction than might otherwise be the case. It is clear that Iraq was a major part of the motivation of the Madrid and London bombers as well as Mohammed Bouyeri, the murderer of Theo van Gogh. In countries such as Pakistan, it is also clear that anti-Americanism grounded in the invasion of Iraq is increasingly being used as a tool of mobilization for radicals.

The missteps of the occupation of Iraq opened a new "field of jihad" for militants who were more than eager to take on U.S. forces in the Arab heartland. For the radicals, killing Americans is the essential task; by doing so, they demonstrate that they are the only ones determined to stand up for Muslim dignities. Through their violence, they have also created a drama of the faith that disaffected Muslims around the world can watch on

television and the Internet. Thus, the jihadist movement's show of its determination to confront American and coalition forces as well as those of the fledgling Iraqi regime has boosted its attractiveness. However benign our intentions were in going into Iraq to liberate the populace there of an evil dictatorship, in the context of the culture of grievance that exists in much of the Muslim world, the extremists have benefited from our missteps and their narrative has had a profound resonance. Again, terrorism is a game of small numbers, and a small number of recruits can make a great difference. The events of the last few years have helped the jihadist movement sign up those recruits.

Mr. Chairman, the United States and its allies have shown great skill in tactical counterterrorism, as the killing of Zarqawi has reminded us. But the skillful application of force and the expert use of intelligence and law enforcement techniques alone will not allow us to prevail in the war on terror. Of course, they are essential, and they have surely saved the lives of many innocents in many countries around the world.

Yet at the level of strategy, we are nowhere near where we should be. It is a central tenet of counterinsurgency that success depends on separating moderates from extremists, and thereby tilting the balance our way. At the core of this challenge is a competition of narratives between radical Islamists and the West. I have summarized our enemies' story. I think most of us intuitively know what ours should be – that the United States and its allies are a benign power that seeks to help all who wish to modernize their societies and improve their material conditions so long as they play by the international rules of the road. Part of that story is that we harbor no enmity for any religion or race or ethnic group but instead recognize that our future depends in no small measure on improvements of conditions for people around the world.

Unfortunately, that story is not coming through. We are indeed in a battle for hearts and minds, and we are not winning. For too many Muslims, our actions, especially in Iraq, are at odds with our professed values. We are also blamed by the radicals – but also many moderates – for the persistence of the autocratic regimes of the Middle East. Until we have policies that match our rhetoric and demonstrate our willingness to support positive and peaceful change in the Muslim world, we will not win over the moderates we need. This is why we can at once succeed tactically but slip strategically, with ever graver consequences. A recognition of this situation points the way to the necessary discussion of how to forge that strategy, and that, I believe is where we must go next and without delay.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak here today.

###

