

National Defense University
Al-Qa'ida Environments Driving the Terrorism Landscape
June 17, 2014

Thank you for the invitation to speak this afternoon. Director Olsen, thank you for that kind introduction and for your distinguished service to helping keep America safe.

Today, I want to focus on American leadership in the world and the future of our battle against global terrorism and extremism, 13 years after 9/11. Leadership requires more than words and well-crafted speeches. Leadership requires providing a vision for the future and making the hard choices to achieve that vision.

We are not far from the Pentagon and are currently located on an Army base along with students of military history and tactics. So I know I don't have to remind this crowd of the devastation brought by al Qa'ida on September 11, 2001. But I do want to remind everyone what al Qa'ida and other Islamic extremist groups continue to do around the world today. Their vision for the future is antithetical to the fundamental human desire for freedom and liberty that is universal across the world. The terrorists' vision of the world -- which they seek to impose around the world through fear, terror, and death -- does not allow for freedom of speech, freedom of religion, or freedom of thought.

The terrorists' vision must be countered. What is required is American leadership; American presence; and American strength. A world without leadership breeds chaos, and in chaos, the extremists and terrorists who do not follow the rules of civil society, have a distinct advantage.

If America doesn't lead by providing assistance to our allies and appropriate resistance to our adversaries, no other country will fill the void.

Combatting global extremist networks that seek to kill and terrorize the innocent requires more than campaign slogans, hashtags and selfies. It requires more than tepid responses to crises as they arise. And it requires more than sternly-worded speeches from the Rose Garden in Washington, DC.

It requires a comprehensive strategy that uses all aspects of American power. This is a strategy we are sorely missing and for which many of our allies around the world are begging. President Theodore Roosevelt famously said effective American foreign policy should be "speak softly but carry a big stick." That policy doesn't work without the stick.

Recently, we have seen what al Qa'ida-linked terrorists can achieve absent U.S. leadership and action. They have now taken an area the size of Indiana between parts of Northeastern Syria and Northern and Western Iraq. They are flying helicopters and driving Humvees. They have imposed strict Sharia law that forbids music or women from going outside. They are achieving their grandest ambition of creating a radical Islamic state in the heart of the Middle East through which it can launch deadly operations against the west.

Last month, the world was captivated by the more than 200 girls in Nigeria kidnapped by Boko Haram, a group the U.S. finally declared a foreign terrorist organization. Of course, we should all care about the

plight of the missing Nigerian girls and help bring them home. But at the same time, shouldn't we also care that we are about to walk away from millions of vulnerable girls and women in Afghanistan? People forget that it was against the law to teach a female to read in Afghanistan before 2001. The brutality of the Taliban against women and anyone who does not think and act exactly like them has been forgotten. If the United States and the international community leave before Afghanistan is truly stabilized, what will happen to the brave women who have entered politics in Afghanistan? What will happen to the brave girls who risk their lives every day to go to school, or to the women who teach them? What will happen to the creative souls who dare listen to music or enjoy art? If the United States of America does not stand up for these women, who will?

In Syria, we confront the criminal Assad regime -- that uses fighter jets, Scud missiles, and chemical weapons against its citizens-- with meaningless threats, unenforced red lines, and empty speeches from Washington, DC. The most powerful nation on earth has done little, as more than 150,000 civilians have been slaughtered. There are even reports that an Assad-regime barrel bomb crudely configured with toxic chlorine gas hit a school, killing 25 children sitting at their desks.

The ongoing conflict has displaced millions, created a massive humanitarian crisis, and threatens to further destabilize the whole region. I believe that America's lack of resolve to address decisively the threat posed by an imploding Syria will embolden dictators and terrorists around the world. Terrorists from every region of the world have taken advantage of the chaos to establish a safe haven from which to train and plan attacks, and they intend to eventually focus on western targets. This Disneyland for jihad has brought the largest pool of al Qa'ida fighters since 9/11 to Syria and has bled into Iraq. That represents as direct a threat to the United States as you will find.

And yet – three years later – we still have no effective plan to combat this threat.

In Iran, I fear this administration is so desperate for a deal that they will agree to almost anything and ignore the evidence of noncompliance by Iran. Meanwhile, Iran will get explicit approval to continue a nuclear program—allowing them to quickly develop a nuclear weapon if they decide to do so. That would likely set off a nuclear arms race in the Middle East, empowering Iran to further terrorize and bully its neighbors, and threaten Israel with annihilation.

In Lebanon, terrorists continue to destabilize an American ally. While Iran's proxy, Hizbollah, attacks al Qa'ida targets and vice versa, Hizbollah has infiltrated the government and holds territory the government has not reclaimed.

In North and West Africa, as in Iraq and Lebanon, we should be doing far more to empower the local governments to address the terrorist threat within their borders by offering resources and our superior expertise to improve their security forces. Leadership and security forces in countries such as Libya, Mauritania, Mali, Chad, Niger, and now Nigeria are desperate for American help. No one is talking about military boots on the ground, but simply increased coordination, intelligence sharing, and training to improve the host nations' capacity to combat not only the problems within their own borders but also the threat of terrorist attacks against U.S. and Western targets.

For this, we should look to Jordan as a model. After years of close American cooperation, training, and support, the Jordanians have a robust, capable, professional counterterrorism force. And when we have this type of strong bilateral relationship, we have the leverage and influence necessary to more effectively promote improved governance and respect for human rights.

As for America's overall counterterrorism policy 13 years after 9/11, we cannot assume the threat has passed. We must maintain pressure anywhere terrorists plan, train, and fundraise. In recent months, the Obama Administration has made troubling changes to its counterterrorism policies by introducing new red tape that leaves key al Qa'ida leaders on the battlefield. It also made a reckless trade to free five senior Taliban officials, four of which are likely to return to the battlefield. I think this is a dangerous mistake, and I intend to continue pushing the Administration to aggressively pursue terrorist threats against America and our allies.

Every American is counting on us to get this right. Each of our allies around the world is counting on us to get this right. As is that little girl learning to read in a Kabul classroom, or the girl in Syria who has difficulty concentrating as bombs and gun fire are heard continuously in the distance.

Serving as Chairman of the House Intelligence Committee has been one of the greatest honors of my life. It has allowed me to travel all around world representing my fellow Americans and the United States government. On a recent trip to the Middle East, a very senior intelligence official from a strong American ally grabbed my arm and said: "Please, Congressman, do not let the American people give up on themselves. We need your leadership. If you do not help us, who will? The Chinese? The Russians?"

I agree with him completely. We cannot ignore the world outside our borders. We must stay engaged. It is in our interests and in the interest of humanity. We are exceptional, and as the world's lone superpower, the United States of America has a responsibility to lead. This is certainly a challenge, but one to which we must rise if we are to secure our interests and promote the peaceful, legitimate interests of people around the world.

Thank you again for having me and I look forward to your questions. God bless.