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Chairman King, Ranking Member Rice, and distinguished members of this subcommittee, thank you for inviting me today. I am honored for the opportunity to testify on a critical national security issue facing our Nation.

Sixteen years after the September 11th attack, America still does not understand its enemy. The U.S. continues to fall victim to strategic surprise at the hands of Sunni jihadist groups. The resurgence of the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) in Iraq and its expansion into Syria was clear by at least mid-2013 but the U.S. did not act until ISIS had seized Iraq's second largest city, beheaded Americans, launched a genocide against an Iraqi minority, and launched a blitz offensive campaign that threatened the survival of Baghdad.¹ The U.S. has intervened against ISIS, but is making the same mistake with al Qaeda, which is building armies in failed states while the world focuses on ISIS. America's consistent inability to identify the threat as it emerges or to neutralize it before it does places Americans at risk and drives up the cost of protecting the homeland by conceding the strategic initiative to the enemy. This pattern of American behavior is the outcome of a fundamental failure to understand the nature of the jihadist movement and the requirements to defeat it.

Al Qaeda and ISIS are elite military organizations pursuing a religious war in defense of Sunni Muslim communities, which they perceive to be under existential threat.² Their goals are the same: to "restore" what they believe to be Allah's rule on earth by tearing down the existing state system, expelling external forces from the Muslim world, and establishing Islamic governance in accordance with a fundamentalist interpretation of the Qur'an.³ Both groups intend to destroy the U.S. and the Western way of life. Al Qaeda differs from ISIS only on the practicalities of how to pursue those goals. ISIS's approach was to launch and sustain an immediate world war. ISIS's strategy is one of massive and sustained confrontation against the West that it calculates will break America's will to fight while activating Sunni Muslim communities to join ISIS' war.⁴ ISIS launched its world war before it had even seized Mosul, deploying attack cells into Europe by at least January 2014.⁵ Mosul fell six months later.⁶ ISIS's strategy is an evolution of its predecessor's shock and awe approach under Abu Mohammad al Zarqawi, which ultimately failed because it drove Iraq's Sunni community to support the U.S. instead. The lesson ISIS learned was to go bigger and harder next time, which it has done to devastating success.

Al Qaeda's strategy is more patient and insidious. Al Qaeda is pursuing long-term advantage rather than short-term wins. It intends first to convince Sunni Muslim populations that its goals are desirable, and then to bring that Sunni support to bear against the West.⁷ Al Qaeda is also preparing for its own world war by enlisting as much of the Sunni Muslim community as it can before launching the next phase. Al Qaeda is dedicating most of its efforts to identifying and supporting local causes within vulnerable or victimized Sunni Muslim communities in order to develop the legitimacy, dependence, and trust that will allow it to transform those communities over time into adherents of al Qaeda's ideology and supporters of its global religious war.⁸ Al Qaeda is vocal about denouncing ISIS's approach,⁹ primarily because opposing the tactics used by ISIS allows al Qaeda to appear moderate in comparison. Al Qaeda has also been willing to sacrifice its brand name in order to allow its affiliates to address local concerns over the international perception of the al Qaeda brand name.¹⁰ Al Qaeda's moderate image enables it to increase the overall percentage of the Sunni Muslim community that supports jihadism by

converting people that would otherwise be alienated by ISIS's brutality. Al Qaeda intends to fold residual elements of ISIS's fighting force and adherent population into its own in time.

Al Qaeda's main effort is in Syria, which has become the world's largest jihadist incubator. Al Qaeda's intent in Syria is to embed within the uprising against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al Assad and to transform that uprising into a global religious insurgency. Al Qaeda deployed a small unit of fighters from Iraq to Syria in order to grow an affiliate there after the uprising started in 2011.¹¹ It initially hid its true goals in Syria in order to avoid alienating what was then mostly a pro-democracy uprising.¹² Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al Nusra, announced its formation in a video on January 2012 but did not state its goal to establish an al Qaeda emirate in Syria that could become a future component of a global al Qaeda caliphate.¹³ Jabhat al Nusra merely identified itself as an Islamist group pursuing the "return the rule of Allah to the earth."¹⁴ Al Qaeda launched immediate and successful suicide attacks against the Syrian regime that helped provide time and space for the Syrian armed opposition to coalesce while al Qaeda built its own fighting force.¹⁵ Al Qaeda's initial reception in Syria was largely that of a necessary evil. Syrians exploited al Qaeda's willingness to contribute to the war against the Assad regime even though most disagreed with al Qaeda's vision for Syria. Al Qaeda's ideology was a problem for the future, while Assad was the here-and-now threat.¹⁶ This perception endures today, but the six years of horrific violence that Syrians have endured makes it increasingly likely that al Qaeda is winning real local support for its goals.

Al Qaeda is also dedicating resources to restructuring the Syrian armed opposition under the leadership of its Syrian affiliate and groups that adhere to a similar ideology. Al Qaeda does not intend to dominate the Syrian opposition outright because doing so risks triggering backlash that could marginalize al Qaeda within the opposition.¹⁷ Al Qaeda instead seeks to mold the opposition over time using a combination of infiltration, negotiated mergers, and discrete attacks against moderates. Al Qaeda's operatives in Syria networked into the leadership of Islamist groups such as Ahrar al Sham al Islamiya that were close to al Qaeda's ideology.¹⁸ Al Qaeda's goal was to ensure that Islamist groups became dominant within the opposition and to influence the evolution of their goals to more closely adhere to al Qaeda's. Meanwhile, Al Qaeda has quietly dedicated resources to purging elements of the Syrian armed opposition that remain unwilling to support its ideology and discrediting the moderate opposition's ideology. Al Qaeda has attacked and destroyed four U.S. backed groups in northern Syria and coopted at least four more since early 2015.¹⁹ Al Qaeda faces little real opposition to these measures because its military support remains vital to the anti-Assad effort. Al Qaeda has grown increasingly bold as a result. Al Qaeda now openly describes its war in Syria as a personal obligation for Sunni Muslims, making it a global war, and openly condemns moderate opposition groups in its propaganda for betraying the Syrian people.²⁰ Al Qaeda's skill and experience manipulating local populations and armed groups in Syria makes it a formidable local actor.

Al Qaeda's rise in Syria is in large part a direct outcome of the strategy of Syrian president Bashar al Assad and his external backers: Iran and Russia. Assad quickly dismissed the opposition against him as terrorist-infiltrated,²¹ and then intentionally fueled the jihadist movement in Syria in order to make it true. He emptied Syrian prison of Islamists and al Qaeda-linked convicts as the protest movement against him gained strength in 2011 in order to create evidence of terrorist involvement in the uprising.²² He has since waged a campaign of deliberate

slaughter against the elements of the opposition that were willing to negotiate with him, including chemical weapons, the intentional targeting of civilian infrastructure and mass executions of political prisoners.²³ His aim was to preclude a Western intervention by eliminating any moderate opposition force that the U.S. could reasonably support. His slogan is “Assad or we burn the country”,²⁴ and that is exactly what he has done. Nearly half of Syria’s prewar population had been displaced by late 2014 according to UN data.²⁵ Three years later, the full scale of the damage is increasingly difficult to measure. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank estimate that rebuilding Syria will cost up to \$200 billion dollars.²⁶ Assad and his backers now want the international community to foot the bill while they continue their war.²⁷

Al Qaeda’s rise has been quickest in northwestern Syria, where the military campaign of the Assad regime and its external backers has focused since Russia’s intervention in September 2015.²⁸ Russia’s air campaign in Syria has primarily targeted moderate, US-backed elements of the Syrian opposition. Russia has also conducted repeated, intentional strikes against civilian infrastructure including hospitals, schools, and mosques.²⁹ The brutal siege and bombardment of opposition-held neighborhoods of Aleppo City over the course of 2016 helped al Qaeda finalize its consolidation of power in northwestern Syria.³⁰ Al Qaeda played a prominent role defending the city, managing to temporarily break through the siege in August.³¹ Al Qaeda’s visible role in Aleppo further concretized its position at the forefront of the Syrian opposition, while the eventual fall of Aleppo to the regime and its backers ultimately assisted al Qaeda’s consolidation by eliminating Syrian opposition groups inside the city that had remained relatively more independent from al Qaeda. Al Qaeda has since transitioned into a governing phase in northwestern Syria. Its activity there focuses on developing an “economic office” to regulate and profit from the local economy and consolidating control over service provision to include humanitarian aid.³² Al Qaeda runs numerous religious schools in the province that include schools for children and for women, some of which have begun to don the Burqa in accordance with Al Qaeda’s ideology.³³ Al Qaeda is now shifting its main effort south, to Dera’a Province on the Israeli and Jordanian borders. Al Qaeda deployed senior military commanders, political leaders, and administrative officials to Dera’a Province in May 2017.³⁴ Al Qaeda intends to replicate its success in Idlib and prepare to disrupt U.S. efforts to achieve a ceasefire in that area or strengthen opposition groups that may be willing to fight al Qaeda in the future.

Al Qaeda’s local support confers large military advantages. Unlike ISIS, al Qaeda does not need to allocate significant resources to maintaining control over the population and purging its own ranks of infiltrators.³⁵ Al Qaeda has freedom of operation throughout Syria’s rebel-held areas that allow it to maneuver and conduct logistical support operations without much risk of disruption.³⁶ The freedom of operations enables al Qaeda rapidly to shift assets across the battlefield as the situation requires, further increasing the value of its contribution to the opposition’s war effort. It is extraordinarily difficult for the U.S. to develop a strategy to destroy al Qaeda without declaring war on behalf of Assad against the Syrian opposition. We at Institute for the Study of War tested over 20 possible U.S. courses of action in Syria, most of which failed because they either strengthened or failed to weaken al Qaeda.³⁷ The key to destroying al Qaeda in Syria is to break its bond with the local population. The U.S. will not break this link until and unless the U.S. develops and executes as counter-Assad strategy in Syria. Even then, a war against al Qaeda will be costly.

Al Qaeda’s current local efforts make it more – not less – dangerous to the U.S. Al Qaeda is still developing external attack capability from Syria as well as its other safe havens in Yemen and Afghanistan.³⁸ The bomb maker for Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Ibrahim al Asiri, has helped train al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate in advanced bomb making techniques.³⁹ The active planning of a cell of al Qaeda external attack operatives based in Syria known as the “Khorasan group” triggered a new campaign of U.S. airstrikes in Syria beginning in September 2014.⁴⁰ Al Qaeda has since chosen temporarily to deprioritize efforts to conduct major attacks in the West in order to avoid provoking an American response that would deny al Qaeda its current freedom of operations. The then-leader of al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate stated in a May 2015 interview with al Jazeera that he received instructions from Al Qaeda leader Aymen al Zawahiri not to conduct attacks abroad.⁴¹ Al Qaeda is still preparing capability for the future, however. Al Qaeda is cultivating its own foreign fighter population in Syria and is likely quietly cultivating a new network in Europe.⁴² Al Qaeda is building up these capabilities while holding them in reserve for its global phase yet to come. That phase may be more effective than ISIS’s current global campaign if al Qaeda manages to acquire a popular mandate from the Syrian rebelling population for a global war.

America is pursuing a self-defeating strategy in Syria, ensuring that the Syrian theater will remain a major jihadist recruitment center for the foreseeable future. The U.S. has taken no meaningful action to contain al Qaeda or slow its growth aside from the handful of airstrikes against al Qaeda leaders in Syria, which have had essentially no effect on the organization’s strength. The U.S. campaign against ISIS will fail to destroy the group under America’s current strategy, and is actually setting conditions that ultimately favor al Qaeda.⁴³ The U.S. has been ceding regional power to Iran and Russia, who view the US as their enemy, in order to focus on ISIS. Members of the Syrian opposition perceive the US to be defacto allied with Iran, Russia, and the Assad regime as a result, and is not an unfair conclusion to make. This perception lends legitimacy to al Qaeda’s narrative that al Qaeda is the only source of protection for the Syrian Sunni community. The U.S. has traded all of this for a series of tactical victories against ISIS that will most likely not endure. America’s primary ground partner in Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) does not have the combat power to retake the rest of ISIS-held terrain beyond Raqqa. America’s reliance on the SDF has put us in an indirect war with Turkey, a NATO ally, which views the Syrian Kurdish People’s Defense Forces (YPG) as a direct threat to its national security because of the organization’s links to the Turkish domestic insurgency waged by the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK).⁴⁴ The U.S. has no discernable strategy for how to seize the rest of ISIS-held terrain in Syria or to extricate ourselves from an indirect war within NATO. There is a very real risk of al Qaeda resurgence in areas retaken from ISIS, moreover. Al Qaeda is positioning to exploit local discontent with SDF rule in Raqqa that is likely to emerge due to the SDF’s adherence to the YPG’s political ideology.⁴⁵ All of these conditions undermine American national security by favoring al Qaeda in the long term, which places the U.S. on a trajectory to fight an even worse war after ISIS.

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⁴ ISIS's propaganda has illustrated this strategy. See: "Dabiq Issue 5," released in November 2014. Safe copy available from *Jihadology* at: <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/the-islamic-state-e2809cdc481biq-magazine-522.pdf>; [ISIS article discussing downfall of US progress], July 3, 2017, available with subscription from the SITE Intelligence Group at: <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Chatter/jihadist-explores-economic-military-implications-of-u-s-led-coalition-against-is.html>.

⁵ The first publically known ISIS attack operative crossed into Greece from Turkey in January 2014. Rukmini Callimachi, "How ISIS built the machinery of terror under Europe's gaze," *The New York Times*, March 29, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/29/world/europe/isis-attacks-paris-brussels.html?_r=0; "Why Nice was an unsurprising location for a terrorist attack," *The Economist*, June 15, 2016, <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21702282-idyllic-mediterranean-beach-town-has-severe-problem-islamist-radicalisation-why>; Paul Cruikshank, "Raid on ISIS suspect in the French Riviera," *CNN*, August 28, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/08/28/world/europe/france-suspected-isis-link/index.html>.

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⁷ Jennifer Cafarella, "Jabhat al Nusra in Syria: an Islamic State for al Qaeda," Institute for the Study of War, December 2014. Copy available from author upon request.

⁸ Jennifer Cafarella, "Jabhat al Nusra in Syria: an Islamic State for al Qaeda," Institute for the Study of War, December 2014. Copy available from author upon request; [Zawahiri statement in support of Syrian uprising as a way to create a state that defends Muslim countries], February 11, 2012, available with subscription from the SITE Intelligence Group at: <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Multimedia/zawahiri-issues-video-in-support-of-syrian-uprising.html>.

⁹ [Zawahiri attacks ISIS for Creating and Maintaining Division], August 29, 2016, available with subscription from the SITE Intelligence Group at: <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Multimedia/zawahiri-calls-fighters-to-unite-attacks-is-for-creating-and-maintaining-division.html>.

¹⁰ Jennifer Cafarella and Katherine Zimmerman, "Avoiding al Qaeda's Syrian trap: Jabhat al Nusra's rebranding," Institute for the Study of War and Critical Threats Project, July 29, 2016, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2016/07/avoiding-al-qaedas-syria-trap-jabhat-al.html>.

¹¹ Tara John, "Everything you need to know about the new Nusra Front," *Time Magazine*, July 29, 2016, <http://time.com/4428696/nusra-front-syria-terror-al-qaeda/>.

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¹⁴ [Jabhat al Nusra formation statement], January 23, 2012, available with subscription from the SITE Intelligence Group at: <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Multimedia/site-intel-group-1-23-12-mb-jihad-levant-syria-video.html>.

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