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## The Al Qa'ida Threat in Pakistan

SETH G. JONES

CT-359

May 2011

Testimony presented before the House Homeland Security Committee,  
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence on May 3, 2011

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*The Al Qa'ida Threat in Pakistan*<sup>2</sup>

Before the Committee on Homeland Security  
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence  
United States House of Representatives

May 3, 2011

Even before the killing of Osama bin Laden, with the growing instability across the Arab world, it had become *de rigueur* to argue that the primary al Qa'ida threat now comes from the Persian Gulf or North Africa. While these regions certainly present a threat to Western security, al Qa'ida's primary command and control structure remains situated in Pakistan. Al Qa'ida and allied groups continue to present a grave threat from this region by providing strategic guidance, overseeing or encouraging terrorist operations, managing a robust propaganda campaign, conducting training, and collecting and distributing financial assistance. As demonstrated over the past year, for example, key operatives such as Ilyas Kashmiri have been involved in plots in Europe and the United States. On May 1, 2010, Faisal Shahzad, who was trained in Pakistan, packed his Nissan Pathfinder with explosives and drove into Times Square in New York City on a congested Saturday night. Only fortune intervened, since the improvised explosive device malfunctioned.

It may now be tempting to focus on terrorist threats to the United States only from Libya, Yemen, Somalia, Egypt, and other countries in the Arab world. But this would be a dangerous mistake. The United States continues to face a serious threat to the homeland from al Qa'ida and several allied groups based in Pakistan, including Lashkar-e Tayyiba and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan. What has likely changed, however, is the nature of the threat from Pakistan, which will likely become more decentralized and diffuse.

### **I. Al Qa'ida's Organizational Structure**

A current understanding of the threat to the U.S. homeland from Pakistan requires a nuanced appreciation of al Qa'ida and its allies. With a leadership structure still in Pakistan, al Qa'ida is a

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<sup>1</sup> The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of RAND or any of the sponsors of its research. This product is part of the RAND Corporation testimony series. RAND testimonies record testimony presented by RAND associates to federal, state, or local legislative committees; government-appointed commissions and panels; and private review and oversight bodies. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

<sup>2</sup> This testimony is available for free download at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT359/>.

notably different organization than a decade ago and can perhaps best be described as a “complex adaptive system.”<sup>3</sup> The term refers to systems that are diverse (composing multiple networks) and adaptive (possessing the capacity to evolve and learn from experience). One key element of complex adaptive systems is they include a series of networks, which are often dispersed and small. Different nodes can communicate and conduct their campaigns with some coordination. As terrorist expert Bruce Hoffman argued, al Qaeda is “in the main flatter, more linear, and more organizationally networked” than it has previously been.<sup>4</sup> The killing of bin Laden may accelerate this decentralization.

Al Qaeda today can perhaps best be divided into five tiers: central al Qaeda, affiliated groups, allied groups, allied networks, and inspired individuals.<sup>5</sup>

First, *central al Qaeda* includes the organization’s leaders, who are based in Pakistan. Despite the death of key figures—such as Osama bin Laden, chief financial officer Shaykh Sa’aid al-Masri, and external operations chief Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Najdi—several top leaders, including Ayman al-Zawahiri, continue to provide strategic-level guidance. Al Qaeda’s goals remain overthrowing regimes in the Middle East (the near enemy, or *al-Adou al-Qareeb*) to establish a pan-Islamic caliphate, and fighting the United States and its allies (the far enemy, or *al-Adou al-Baeed*) who support them. As demonstrated over the past year, Ilyas Kashmiri has been involved in thwarted plots to conduct Mumbai-style attacks in Europe and to target a newspaper in Copenhagen that published cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. Abu Yahya al-Libi continues to act as one of al Qaeda’s senior ideologues and religious figures. There are also a range of Americans in central al Qaeda, including Adam Gadahn and Adnan El Shukrijumah (aka Jafar al-Tayyar).

The second tier includes a range of *affiliated groups* that have become formal branches of al Qaeda. They benefit from central al Qaeda’s financial assistance and inspiration, and receive at least some guidance, training, arms, money, or other support. They often add “al Qaeda” to their name to identify themselves as affiliated organizations, such as Al Qaeda in Iraq, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and Al Qaeda East Africa. Al Qaeda’s senior leadership, including Ayman al-Zawahiri, retain a degree of oversight and, when necessary, may discipline members of these groups for failing to follow guidance.

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Murray Gell-Mann, *The Quark and the Jaguar* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994); John Holland, *Hidden Order* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995); Kevin Dooley, “A Complex Adaptive Systems Model of Organization Change,” *Nonlinear Dynamics, Psychology, and Life Science*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1997, pp. 69-97.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, Revised Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 285.

<sup>5</sup> Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*.

The third involves *allied groups* that have established a direct relationship with al Qa'ida, but have not become formal members. This arrangement allows the groups to remain independent and pursue their own goals, but to work with al Qa'ida for specific operations or training purposes when their interests converge. In Pakistan, one example is Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, whose interests remain largely parochial in South Asia, though they have been involved in attacks overseas— including the U.S. homeland. Another is Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, which is based in Pakistan and has historically operated in India and Kashmir, though it has expanded its interests to include Afghanistan, Europe, and perhaps the United States. Outside of Pakistan, there a range of other allied groups, such as al Shabaab, which operates in Somalia but has a relationship with diaspora communities across the world, including in the United States.

The fourth tier involves *allied networks*—small, dispersed groups of adherents who enjoy some direct connection with al Qa'ida. These groups are not large insurgent organizations, but often self-organized small networks that congregate, radicalize, and plan attacks. In some cases, they comprise individuals who had prior terrorism experience in Algeria, the Balkans, Chechnya, Afghanistan, or perhaps Iraq. In other cases, they include individuals that have traveled to camps in Afghanistan or Pakistan for training, as with Mohammed Siddique Khan and the British Muslims responsible for the successful July 2005 London bombing.

Finally, the *inspired individuals* include those with no direct contact to al Qa'ida central, but who are inspired by the al Qa'ida cause and outraged by perceived oppression in Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Palestinian territory. They tend to be motivated by a hatred toward the West and its allied regimes in the Middle East. Without direct support, these networks tend to be amateurish, though they can occasionally be lethal. In November 2004, a member of the Hofstad Group in the Netherlands, Mohammed Bouyeri, murdered the Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh in Amsterdam. But many others, such as the cell led by Russell Defreitas that plotted to attack New York City's John F. Kennedy International Airport in 2007 (codenamed "chicken farm"), were rudimentary and would have been difficult to execute.

Taken together, al Qa'ida has transformed itself by 2011 into a more diffuse – and more global – terror network. While Pakistan is its home base, it has a growing array of allied groups and networks on multiple continents. In fact, the death of Osama bin Laden suggests that the main threat to the U.S. homeland from Pakistan is perhaps more diffuse than at any time since September 2001, especially from allied groups and networks.

## II. Debating the Threat from Pakistan

There has been growing skepticism about the threat to the U.S. homeland from Pakistan. In his 2011 testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Homeland Security Committee, Michael Leiter, director of the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center, remarked that al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula is "probably the most significant risk to the U.S. homeland."<sup>6</sup> Others have argued that al Qa'ida has a nearly endless supply of sanctuaries in weak states, such as Yemen, Somalia, Djibouti, Sudan, and even Iraq. "Many of these countries," notes Stephen Biddle from the Council on Foreign Relations, "could offer al-Qa'ida better havens than Afghanistan ever did."<sup>7</sup>

While this argument seems reasonable, and Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula certainly poses a clear threat to the U.S. homeland, the evidence suggests that al Qa'ida leaders retain an unparalleled relationship with local networks in the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier. Ayman al-Zawahiri and several senior al Qa'ida leaders have a 30-year, unique history of trust and collaboration with the Pashtun militant networks located in Pakistan and Afghanistan. These relationships are deeper and more robust than the comparatively nascent, tenuous, and fluid relationships that al Qa'ida has developed with al Shabaab in Somalia, local tribes in Yemen, or other areas. Indeed, al Qa'ida has become embedded in multiple networks that operate on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Key groups include the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, Haqqani Network, and Lashkar-e Tayyiba. Al Qa'ida has effectively established a foothold with several tribes or sub-tribes in the region, such as some Ahmadzai Wazirs, Mehsuds, Utmanzai Wazirs, Mohmands, Salarzais, and Zadrans. The secret to al Qa'ida's staying power, it turns out, has been its success in cultivating supportive networks in an area generally inhospitable to outsiders.

Al Qa'ida provides several types of assistance to Pakistan militant groups in return for sanctuary. One is coordination. It has helped establish shuras (councils) to coordinate strategic priorities, operational campaigns, and tactics against Western allied forces. In addition, al Qa'ida operatives have been involved in planning military operations, such as launching suicide attacks, emplacing improvised explosive devices, and helping conduct ambushes and raids. It also helps run training camps for militants, which cover the recruitment and preparation of suicide bombers, intelligence, media and propaganda efforts, bomb-making, and religious indoctrination. Al Qa'ida provides some financial aid to militant groups, though it appears to be a small percentage of their total aid.

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<sup>6</sup> Testimony of Michael Leiter, Director of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), Hearing of the House Homeland Security Committee, February 9, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Biddle, "Is It Worth It? The Difficult Case for War in Afghanistan," *The American Interest*, July-August 2009.

Finally, it has cooperated with Pakistan militant groups to improve and coordinate propaganda efforts, including through the use of DVDs, CDs, jihadi websites, and other media forums.

Some pundits have argued that al Qa'ida operatives primarily reside in Pakistan, not Afghanistan. But the 1,519-mile border, drawn up in 1893 by Sir Henry Mortimer Durand, the British Foreign Secretary of India, is largely irrelevant. Locals regularly cross the border to trade, pray at mosques, visit relatives, and—in some cases—target NATO and coalition forces. Indeed, al Qa'ida migration patterns since the anti-Soviet jihad show frequent movement in both directions. Osama bin Laden established al Qa'ida in Peshawar, Pakistan in 1988, though he and other Arab fighters crossed the border into Afghanistan regularly to fight Soviet forces and support the mujahedeen. When bin Laden returned to the area in 1996 from Sudan, he settled near Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan and later moved south to Kandahar Province. After the overthrow of the Taliban regime, however, most of the al Qa'ida leadership moved back to Pakistan, though some settled in neighboring Iran.

Other skeptics contend that informal, homegrown networks inspired by al Qa'ida have become the most serious threat to the West.<sup>8</sup> Ayman al-Zawahiri and central al Qa'ida have become extraneous, according to this argument. Skeptics contend that impressionable young Muslims can radicalize through the Internet or interactions with local extremist networks. They don't need a headquarters, the argument goes. These skeptics contend that the threat to the West, therefore, comes largely from a "leaderless jihad" in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and North America rather than a relationship with central al Qa'ida located in Pakistan. As discussed in the next section, however, there is sparse evidence to support this argument.

### **III. The Terrorist Threat to the U.S. Homeland**

Many of the recent terrorist threats to the U.S. homeland have been connected to al Qa'ida and its allies in Pakistan, though a few have been tied to such areas as Yemen. Sparsely few serious attacks have come from purely homegrown terrorists. Central al Qa'ida, headquartered in Pakistan, has long focused on attacking the U.S. homeland.

More recently, however, the United States has faced a growing threat from allied groups and networks operating in Pakistan. In September 2009, for example, Najibullah Zazi was arrested for planning attacks on the New York City subway. Najibullah Zazi pleaded guilty in U.S. District Court to "conspiracy to use weapons of mass destruction" and "providing material support for a

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Sagemen, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), pp. 133, 140.

foreign terrorist organization” based in Pakistan.<sup>9</sup> Several al Qa’ida operatives, including Saleh al-Somali and Adnan Gulshair el Shukrijumah, were involved in the plot. According to U.S. government documents, Zazi’s travels to Pakistan and his contacts with individuals there were pivotal in helping him build an improvised explosive device using triacetone triperoxide, the same explosive used effectively in the 2005 London subway bombings. In October 2009, Chicago-based David Coleman Headley (aka Daood Sayed Gilani) was arrested for involvement in terrorist activity. He is a Pakistani-American who had cooperated with Lashkar-e Tayyiba and senior al Qa’ida leaders to conduct a series of attacks, including the November 2008 Mumbai attack and a plot to attack a newspaper in Copenhagen that had published a cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad. His base in Chicago made him ideally suited for a future attack in the U.S. homeland.

In December 2009, five Americans from Alexandria, Virginia—Ahmed Abdullah Minni, Umar Farooq, Aman Hassan Yemer, Waqar Hussain Khan, and Ramy Zamzam—were arrested in Pakistan and later convicted on terrorism charges. Better known as “Five Guys,” a reference to the hamburger chain close to their homes along Route One in Alexandria, they radicalized in the United States and went to Pakistan for training and operational guidance. In May 2010, Faisal Shahzad attempted to detonate an improvised explosive device in Times Square in New York City after being trained by bomb-makers from Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan.

Europe has faced similar threats. The 2004 Madrid attacks involved senior al Qa’ida leaders, including Amer Azizi.<sup>10</sup> The 2005 London attacks and 2006 transatlantic airlines plot involved senior al Qa’ida operatives in Pakistan, who were involved in strategic, operational, and even tactical support. Jonathan Evans, the Director General of MI5, the United Kingdom’s domestic intelligence agency, recently acknowledged that at least half of the country’s priority plots continue to be linked to “al Qa’ida in the tribal areas of Pakistan, where al Qa’ida senior leadership is still based.”<sup>11</sup> Over the last decade, there have been a laundry list of plots and attacks in the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, Netherlands, France, India, and other countries with links to al Qa’ida and other terrorist groups with a foothold in Pakistan.

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<sup>9</sup> U.S. District Court, Eastern District of New York, United States of America Against Najibullah Zazi, 09 CR 663(S-1), February 22, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Fernando Reinares, “The Madrid Bombings and Global Jihadism,” *Survival*, Vol. 52, No. 2, April–May 2010, pp. 83–104.

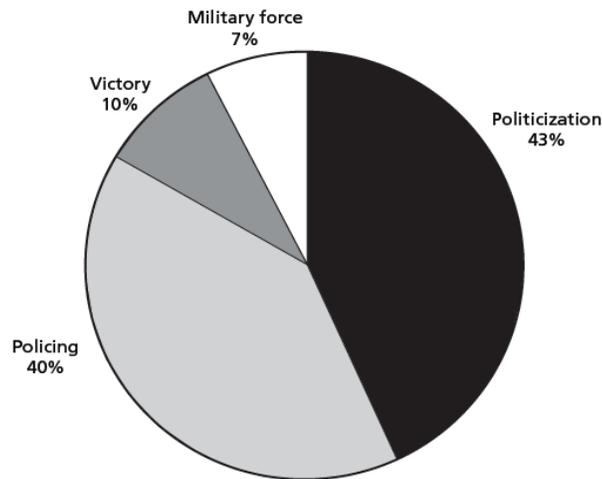
<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Evans, “The Threat to National Security,” Address at the Worshipful Company of Security Professionals by the Director General of the Security Service, September 16, 2010.

#### IV. Countering the Threat

While the al Qa'ida threat from Pakistan has remained severe, the United States has struggled to pursue an effective counterterrorism strategy. In 2001, less than one hundred CIA and U.S. Special Operations personnel, supported by punishing U.S. airpower, toppled the Taliban regime and unhinged al Qa'ida from Afghanistan.

In examining 648 terrorist groups, I found that most groups end in one of two ways. Either they join the political process, or else small networks of clandestine intelligence and security forces arrest or kill the leadership. Large-scale, conventional military forces have rarely been the primary reason for the end of terrorist groups, and few groups achieve victory.<sup>12</sup> Military forces may help penetrate and garrison an area frequented by terrorist groups and, if well sustained, may temporarily reduce terrorist activity. But once the situation in an area becomes untenable for terrorists, they will transfer their activity to another location. Terrorists groups generally fight wars of the weak. They do not put large, organized forces into the field, except when they engage in insurgencies. This means that military forces can rarely engage terrorist groups using what most armies are trained in: conventional tactics, techniques, and procedures. In some cases, such as when terrorist groups ally with large and well-equipped insurgent groups, conventional forces may be more apropos.

Figure 1: How Terrorist Groups End



By 2011, however, U.S. policymakers seemed to better understand the utility of clandestine efforts. The United States and Pakistan increased covert efforts against al Qa'ida, improving their

<sup>12</sup> Seth G. Jones and Martin Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering Al Qa'ida* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND 2008).

intelligence collection capabilities and nearly tripling the number of drone strikes in Pakistan from 2009 levels. Recognizing the importance of al Qa'ida's local hosts, the United States and Pakistan stepped up efforts to recruit assets among rival sub-tribes and clans in the border areas.

In Pakistan, there were a range of senior-level officials killed—such as Osama bin Laden, chief financial officer Shaykh Sa'aid al-Masri, and external operations chief Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Najdi—through a combination of U.S. Special Operations and intelligence efforts. This left perhaps less than 300 al Qa'ida members in Pakistan, though there were larger numbers of foreign fighters and allied organizations. In late 2010, Ayman al-Zawahiri ordered al Qa'ida operatives to disperse into small groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan, away from the tribal areas, and cease most activities for a period of up to one year to ensure the organization's survival. In Afghanistan, intelligence and U.S. Special Operations activities disrupted al Qa'ida, which became less cohesive and more decentralized among a range of foreign fighters. Al Qa'ida retained a minimal presence in Afghanistan, with perhaps less than 100 full-time fighters at any one time. This estimate is larger if one counts al Qa'ida-allied foreign fighter networks operating in Afghanistan.

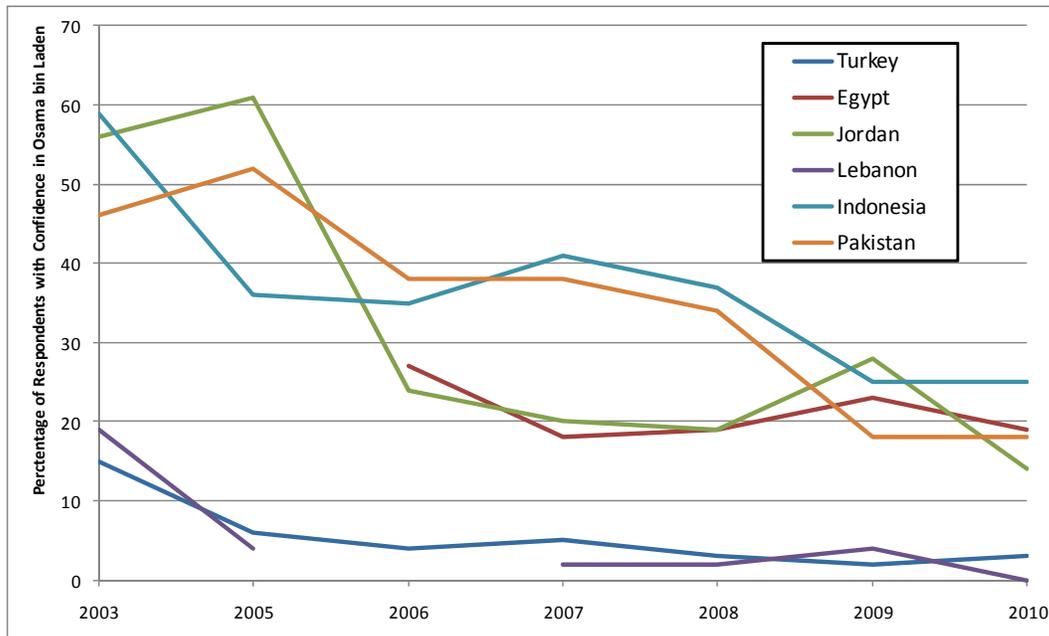
What does this fragile progress mean? For starters, the number of al Qa'ida operatives in Afghanistan and Pakistan shrunk from 2001 levels, where it was likely over 1,000 fighters. More importantly, however, Western efforts disrupted al Qa'ida's command and control, communications, morale, freedom of movement, and fund-raising activities. Central al Qa'ida was a weaker organization, though not defeated. The death of senior leaders also forced al Qa'ida to become increasingly reliant on couriers, hampered communication because of operational security concerns, delayed the planning cycle for operations, and exposed operations to interdiction.

## **V. Conclusion: A Long War**

The landscape along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan, where al Qa'ida is largely headquartered, is strangely reminiscent of Frederick Remington or C.M. Russell's paintings of the American West. Gritty layers of dust sap the life from a parched landscape. With the exception of a few apple orchards, there is little agricultural activity because the soil is too poor. Several dirt roads snake through the area, but virtually none are paved. In this austere environment, central al Qa'ida has been disrupted. Its popularity has also declined.

Figure 2: Poll of al Qa'ida<sup>13</sup>

*How much confidence do you have in Osama bin Laden to do the right thing regarding world affairs?*



Yet there are still several challenges. One is the absence of an effective campaign to counter al Qa'ida's extremist ideology. Public perceptions of al Qa'ida have plummeted. According to a 2010 public opinion poll published by the New America Foundation, more than three-quarters of residents in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas opposed the presence of al Qa'ida. A poll conducted by the Pew Research Center indicated that positive views of Osama bin Laden significantly declined across the Middle East and Asia between 2001 and 2010, including in Indonesia, Jordan, Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt, and Lebanon. In addition, there has been widespread opposition to al Qa'ida's ideology and tactics among conservative Islamic groups, especially al Qa'ida's practice of killing civilians. Public opposition of al Qa'ida, especially from legitimate Muslim religious leaders, needs to be better encouraged and publicized.

In addition, Pakistan has done a remarkable job against some militant groups in areas like Swat and northern parts of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, where scores of Pakistan army,

<sup>13</sup> Pew Research Center, *Obama More Popular Abroad Than at Home, Global Image of U.S. Continues to Benefit* (Washington, DC: Pew Global Attitudes Project, June 2010).

Frontier Corps, police, and intelligence units have died in combat. Yet Pakistan's continuing support to some militant groups, including Lashkar-e Tayyiba and the Haqqani Network, needs to end. Even more disturbing, both Lashkar-e Tayyiba and the Haqqani Network have a direct, senior-level relationship with some al Qa'ida leaders. Supporting militant groups has been deeply counter-productive to stability in South Asia – including in Pakistan – and has had second- and third-order effects that threaten the U.S. homeland.

The struggle against al Qa'ida and allied networks operating from Pakistan remains a long one. As Winston Churchill observed over a century ago during the British struggles in the Northwest Frontier, time in this area is measured in decades, not months or years. It's a concept that doesn't always come easy to Westerners. Still, a failure to adequately deal with the terrorist threat in Pakistan will not only prolong this struggle, but it will severely undermine on-going U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, risk the further destabilization of a nuclear Pakistan, and ultimately threaten the U.S. homeland.