



**Media Conference Call: Background Briefing on the State of Al Qaida**

**April 27, 2012**

**3:30 p.m. EDT**

Michael Birmingham: Good afternoon. This is Mike Birmingham. I'd like to go over the ground rules first. Thank you for joining us. Upfront, I wanted to let you know that the scope of this afternoon's backgrounder is limited to the state of al-Qaida.

We've received many requests over the last several weeks on what the state of al-Qaida is one year after the raid and that's the parameters of this particular discussion today. But we're not going to discuss the raid or provide any special insights on the raid. We're going to stick with AQ today.

Starting off for us today we will have Deputy Director of National Intelligence for Intelligence Integration, Robert Cardillo, C-A-R-D-I-L-L-O. He's going to make opening remarks, which will be on the record. His remarks may be captured by audio recording devices.

And then after he finishes we will go into the background portion so that our analysts can provide more in depth context of the issues. After Mr. Cardillo's remarks you may still keep your audio recording devices on, however, that's only to capture accurate quotes.

The other briefers that we have here today will be attributed as a Senior U.S. Counterterrorism Official and a Senior U.S. Intelligence Official.

After the briefing, there will be an opportunity for some Q&A and the meeting manager at that point will instruct you how to queue up for a question.

With that I'll turn it over to Mr. Cardillo for the on the record portion.

Robert Cardillo: Thanks and thank you all for participating. This coming week marks the anniversary of the successful raid on Osama bin Laden's compound. It was an operation that culminated many years of difficult and extremely sensitive intelligence work by many dedicated men and women across the intelligence community, and followed by the bold and brave action of our military forces.

With bin Laden's death the global jihadist movement lost its most iconic, most effective and most inspirational leader. We assess that al-Qaida's new commander, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has not changed al-Qaida's strategic direction.

However, most al-Qaida members find Zawahiri's leadership style less compelling than bin Laden's images of holy man and warrior and will not offer and have not offered the deference that they provided bin Laden, nor does Zawahiri have the centralizing, unifying effect as did UBL.

Now the next two or three years are a critical transition phase for terrorists threatening the United States, particularly from al-Qaida and like-minded groups. Over that period we see a movement that will be more decentralized for al-Qaida's operational importance diminished and regional al-Qaida affiliates conducting the bulk of the terrorist attacks.

We also believe that multiple voices will provide inspiration for the movement and that there will be a vigorous debate about local versus global jihad within and among terrorist organizations. A key challenge for the U.S. and for the West during this transition will be balancing aggressive counterterrorism operations with the risk of exacerbating the anti-Western global agenda and galvanizing new fronts in the movement.

Al-Qaida's regional affiliates have sworn allegiance to Zawahiri as the new amir of the group and we believe the affiliates, which include al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qaida in Iraq, al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and al-Shabaab, will remain committed to the group's overall ideology and remain a threat to U.S. interests. But that those groups in total will surpass the remnants of the core al-Qaida remaining in Pakistan. Each group will seek opportunities to strike Western interests in its operating area, but each group will have different intent and ability to execute those plans.

Now the uprisings across the Middle East in North Africa that began in December 2010 have substantially influenced the global jihadist movement. The unrest and reduced security provides terrorists inspired by that movement more operating space as security services focus more on internal security and regime stability. However, they've been unsuccessful to date.

As these new governments take real steps to address public demands for political participation and democratic institution and remain committed to CT efforts, we judge that core al-Qaida and the global jihadist movement will experience a strategic setback.

In that the Arab Spring strikes at the very core of their jihadist narrative, which is if I could paraphrase that the pathway to a rightful and righteous Islamic future are violent and direct attacks against the apostate regimes, while Tunisia's election in October, Egypt's election in November, Yemen's election in February and Libya's upcoming election in June all threaten that al-Qaida fundamental view.

However, prolonged instability or unmet promises by these new governments of reform would give al-Qaida and its affiliates and its allies more time to establish networks, gain support and potentially engage in operations, again with less scrutiny from local security services.

The threat from the United States from homegrown violent extremists will be characterized by lone actors or small groups inspired by al-Qaida's ideology, but not formally affiliated with it or other groups.

And I'll finish with the most demonstrable evidence that the terrorist threat is transitioning is the reduced threat of a mass casualty attack via chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear attack on the United States.

We continue to assess that a mass attack by a foreign terrorist group using such a weapon -- chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear, to be unlikely in the next year and that's a result of the counterterrorism pressure that's been applied as a whole government against that threat.

And Mike, I'll stop there.

Michael Birmingham: Okay. That completes the on the record portion. We now go to the backgrounder portion. First is the Senior U.S. Counterterrorism Official.

Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism

Official: Thanks. Let me make just a few observations about each of the things that Robert just talked about. First, al-Qaida core then each of the affiliates. and maybe a couple of words about the Arab Spring at the end.

I think it is not questionable that bin Laden's death was a significant event and sort of the overall demise of al-Qaida as an organization. I think it's important to remember, though, that a year ago today al-Qaida was already in decline.

So the death of bin Laden was significant, but really only in contributing to an already pretty clear path. Very aggressive counterterrorism operations and the

lack of success by bin Laden and al-Qaida I think had already charted that path at least two years before the death of bin Laden.

I think the overall impact of that decline and the contribution certainly of bin Laden's death, is that the kind of terrorism, the likely course of attack that we face here has really changed substantially.

And I think it's pretty clear that the likelihood of a sophisticated multi-pronged attack, the kind of attack like 9/11, are just really substantially decreased right now. It's really hard to imagine al-Qaida core gathering together the resources, the training, the talent, the money to repeat a 9/11 type of attack.

I also think it's important to note that it's really too soon to declare victory. I think we, inside the counterterrorism community, have debated for over a year but certainly since bin Laden's death, what is the trajectory of this organization and when will we know that we've actually defeated it?

I think we divide al-Qaida into two segments, one, the organization against which we've made significant progress. In fact some could argue, I think, that the organization that brought us 9/11 is essentially gone. But the movement, and I'll come to the affiliates in a minute and they're the - certainly the best evidence of the movement.

The movement certainly survives. The ideology of the global jihad, bin Laden's philosophy, that survives in a variety of places outside of Pakistan. And I think it's also important to note that al-Qaida is a resilient organization. It's faced incredible, diverse difficulties in the past after leaving Afghanistan. It was patient. It managed to wait us out.

And you know what, they're clearly attempting to do that again right now. Al-Zawahiri and Abu Yahya, while not having the same level of respect and

leadership that bin Laden had are still capable leaders and I wouldn't count them out. Their intent to attack both the West in general and the United States specifically certainly still remains.

Just a point on Robert's observation that one of the most significant and most difficult threats to disrupt on our side are these so-called lone actors. Now I'll put the Toulouse shooter, Merah, in the general category of lone actors, despite the fact that he had probably some connection to either al-Qaida or an affiliated organization.

People like Merah who act on their own, who equip themselves with weapons and who decide to act essentially on own timing and at their own targets, are truly the most difficult target we face.

So looking at the affiliates, again, the best evidence that the al-Qaida theology survives the author, and we look at them in sort of a rank order. And I'll try and talk about each one very briefly in the order in which we consider them to be important.

The first, pretty clearly the affiliate we're most worried about, the affiliate we spend the most time on and the affiliate that's brought us the most serious homeland attacks is obviously AQAP in Yemen.

They are not only intent on attacking the United States as witnessed by the underwear bomb and the cargo plot in the last year and a half, but we are convinced that they continue to plot against us and their rhetoric, their propaganda is both widespread and effective.

They're also operating in a space that is advantageous to them. They're operating in the midst of essentially an insurgency, a multi-polar struggle for the control of

Yemen and that allows them the opportunity to recruit, to fundraise, to plot attacks.

One thing we'll see in common in all four of the affiliates I'm going to talk about is a shift over the past year and I think this is distinctive after bin Laden's death, although it was a trend I think that started before, and that's a shift away from global and towards local.

It doesn't mean they've abandoned their global jihadist intentions, but it means that they are more focused on their local situation, partly so that they can free up time and space so that some time in the future they can take up the mantle again of the global jihad, in their minds. So AQAP Yemen clearly occupies the first position.

The next - and the next three, it's hard to distinguish. They're all important but not of the same caliber as al-Qaida in Yemen. I'll talk about AQ in Iraq. AQI in Iraq is still a very dangerous, potent, lethal organization within Iraq.

I think we've witnessed in four out of the last five months countrywide lethal attacks against Shia, against government targets, against police, killing several hundred people within Iraq and showing a capability to operate not just in Baghdad or in traditional Sunni strongholds, but really across the country.

I think we certainly expected some increase in their operations after the U.S. withdrawal. I'm not sure I would describe what's happening as too much a surprise. I do think that a piece of good news is the Iraqi security forces are actually doing a decent job of keeping up with AQI. But it is certainly a battle and AQI is a well armed adversary.

One last thing I'd point out on AQI is a clear interest in affecting the future of Syria. I think we have seen a very clear interest by al-Qaida core in affecting the transition of governments in the Arab Spring, from starting in Tunisia and Libya and Egypt and that is clearly true as well in Syria. And al-Qaida is interested in not only affecting the result, but in contributing to the fighting.

As in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya though, al-Qaida has to be careful. It is an interesting data point that al-Qaida is not as popular as it once was. It has made very few strides in the Arab Spring countries. I think that is as well true in Syria where there are few obvious sympathizers to the al-Qaida cause.

Al-Qaida has also learned a number of important lessons from mistakes it's made, particularly in Iraq where it became highly unpopular after killing - basically randomly killing hundreds if not thousands of fellow Muslims. They're apparently trying to avoid that in Syria.

So in Algeria and Mali, the Maghreb and the Sahel we have al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, it's largely become a criminal gang. They have made millions of dollars kidnapping and ransoming European hostages.

I don't want to downplay the potential threat that they play. They have a very aggressive amir of the organization who has certainly aspirations, not just to attack Western interests in North Africa, but historically in France and Europe and beyond.

And he listens quite carefully to the advice and the counsel of al-Qaida in Pakistan which has been - and we could read that in the bin Laden - in what bin Laden was saying before his death, encouraging affiliates and including the Algerians to attack Western targets. They're also teaming up with local tribes in



the Sahel to take advantage of the instability in Mali after the coup and just generally an unstable situation.

The last affiliate perhaps and a story more tinged in optimism, and I'm not really known as an optimist, is Shabaab in Somalia. Shabaab was really quickly on the rise in Somalia for the last several years.

It controlled most of Southern Somalia, including Moghadishu, the ports, much of the tribal area inland, and for a number of reasons they have lost a great deal of their momentum and their popularity, two primary reasons.

One is the multi-pronged military offensive against Shabaab by the Ethiopians, the Kenyans and Amazon within Moghadishu that has deprived Shabaab of much of its territory.

I think in some ways more importantly has been how Shabaab has mishandled the management of Southern Somalia when the population, nearly 4 million Somalians, were facing imminent famine Shabaab refused to allow the U.N. to provide assistance to provide food aid. And I think Shabaab essentially lost most of its local support and it resulted in furious and ongoing leadership struggles among the Shabaab leadership.

That's not to say that there's no threat coming from Shabaab. There's a group of foreign fighters that are affiliated with both Shabaab leadership and old al-Qaida, the al-Qaida core, who need to be watched very carefully.

Why don't I stop there since you undoubtedly have a bunch of questions.

Michael Birmingham: Okay. At this point we will go to Q&A. The Q&A will also, again, be on background and the meeting manager at this time will tell you all how to queue up.

Coordinator: Yes. At this time if you'd like to ask a question, please press star then 1. To withdraw your request at any time, you may press star then 2. Again, if you'd like to ask a question, please press star then 1. One moment for our first question.

Again, if you'd like to ask a question, please press star then 1. One moment for the first question. And our first question will come from Kimberly Dozier. Your line is open.

Kimberly Dozier:  
Associated Press Hi there. Thank you for taking the question. Where do you believe, your best guess, is Ayman al-Zawahiri right now and can you also walk us through the general size of core al-Qaida and it's affiliates? Last time we had a chat, you thought al-Qaida in Iraq was the largest organization. Has AQAP surpassed that? Thanks.

Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism

Official: So I was once with Porter Goss when he made the mistake of saying, "I know exactly where Osama bin Laden is." And everyone perked up and he pointed to the map and essentially brushed his hand over all of Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India and said, "Somewhere out there."

I'm not going to make the mistake of saying I know where he is. I don't know where he is. I think it's safe to say that he is somewhere in the Afghanistan, Pakistan area, but that's a big area.

On the size of the core and the affiliates, I would put the core in the sort of low hundreds. The numbers of the affiliates is a difficult thing to pin down, particularly in Yemen where, tribal loyalties are pretty transient.

And when AQAP is doing well they could have several thousand members, and when they're not the numbers could go down. I suspect, the same is true in Iraq, but I would put AQI membership in the hundreds.

Kimberly Dozier: Thank you. Can you give us a heads-up on where you think Saif al-Adel is and al-Mauritani? Are they still in Iran?

Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism

Official: You know, it's sort of a very popular betting game on where the management council is and there have been rumors over the nearly last ten years since they've been in custody in Iran as to, who's been out and who's still in.

And I will say that I'm pretty confident that Saif al-Adel is, despite all the rumors of his being back in Pakistan, I still think he's enjoying Iranian hospitality.

Kimberly Dozier: Fantastic. And any guesses on the Number 3 to al-Qaida now?

Michael Birmingham: Kim, we've got some others who need some questions.

Kimberly Dozier: I figured, I have to ask.

Michael Birmingham: Okay. Thanks, Kim.

Coordinator: The next question comes from Matthew Shofield. Your line is open.

Matthew Shofield: Yes, hi, thanks for doing this. What about, you know, Shabaab and AQAP have had some luck radicalizing in the United States and North America. What's the current thinking on the threat of that?

Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism

Official: The threat of radicalization by AQAP?

Matthew Shofield: Yes, kind of the AQAP Shabaab radicalization of lone wolves in North America and United States. I mean, we heard in Canada they were expressing some concern over that this week. Where do we stand?

Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism

Official: First of all, I think it's difficult to identify the precise source of radicalization. It's sort of a process. Lots of things contribute to it and some of it depends on the individual being radicalized. I would actually maybe correct the question a bit.

I'm not sure I've seen a lot of - when you say AQAP, I think you mean perhaps the propaganda that comes out of specifically Anwar al-Awlaki, his influence as...

Matthew Shofield: Yes.

Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism

Official: Yes. So there are two different dynamics going on right here. One is the personal charisma of an individual, his clerical status and the effectiveness of his speeches, his propaganda, his written word, and that has clearly been quite effective.

I think the FBI has said in the past that a striking number of individuals who have been arrested for support to terrorist groups have had in their possession some sort of Awlaki propaganda.

On Shabaab, the story is, I mean, it's complicated and hard to do metrics on. But I would say since we started noting a significant number of young Somalis in the United States being radicalized and shipping back to Somalia for jihad, I think that trend has decreased.

I mean part of that is that the strongest opposition to that came from the Somali communities in the United States. And the parents of those young men who are coming to federal officials saying, "My child is gone. Can you help get him back? How do we as a community prevent this from happening?"

And in fact, in the Somali case it's much less. In fact, almost non-existent that they're being radicalized for the jihad. They're being radicalized for Somali nationalism. They went to Somali to help fight the Ethiopians.

Very few of the Americans who went to Somalia in the last four or five years did so because they thought bin Laden was cool. Some of them went because they thought some of the previous Americans who had gone, who in fact were influenced by Shabaab, but thought they were cool. But the numbers of Americans in Somalia really is, I think, shrinking.

Matthew Shofield: Okay.

Michael Birmingham: Okay, next.

Coordinator: The next question will come from Eric Schmitt. Your line is open.

Eric Schmitt:  
New York Times A little bit more the issue of Mali and the space now that AQIM and perhaps other groups have to move in there, what do you see as the immediate trend and how do you see the Malians or African countries responding to this perhaps with American assistance?

Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism

Official: Well, I think, you know, one of our key objectives in the Sahel is to build - help build local CT capability and Mali is a really important link in that chain. And when after the coup, they are naturally now much more focused on, local stability, the transition to a new government, whatever that may be.

And everyone around Mali, whether Niger or Algeria, are equally as concerned with that and looking at border security. So while their attention shifts from a CT agenda to a stability agenda, it gives AQIM the opportunity to - form movement and perhaps additional kidnappings.

But I think that you look at the Sahel on the map and you see this wide open expanse of essentially uninhabited no man's land. And it's the ideal place for AQIM to hide out, to move around and the fact that, they can ally with a group like the Tuareg who have, who know the territory, are well armed.

And I would add what adds to our concern about this is the outflow of weapons and capability out of Libya, which is, happening right now and of some concern. If you match the money that AQIM has received from kidnappings with the weapons that are on sale in any bazaar in Western Libya, it's a dangerous combination.

Eric Schmitt: Thank you.

Coordinator: The next question comes from Pam Benson. Your line is open.

Pam Benson: We'd just like to get a little bit better fix on your view of the threat posed  
CNN currently by AQAP. It's seen as the most operational, most aggressive, but I think you said that you saw over the next year the most likely threat would be of lone

wolves here. Could you rule out that we'll see a cargo bomb or some other thing coming down the pike soon?

Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism

Official: No, yes. I was thinking what would happen to me if I actually ruled out the possibility of another attack for the next year? I think that would be unwise. I mean, you know, just according to two of the - two pretty important metrics. One is history and the other is what we're observing right now, AQAP has very cleverly attacked us twice, and nearly succeeded both times.

And their capability since those failed attacks has increased. So it seems to me not only prudent but pretty logical that, a more capable group that has attacked us before and retains the intent to attack us now, and has a more favorable environment in some ways in Yemen than it did in the past.

I mean, I will say that the transition of government from Saleh to al-Hadi, some signs that, the Yemenis are good CT partners that they are improving their capability. I mean the tide has certainly not yet turned against AQAP, but they are still - I believe they're our most dangerous affiliate adversary.

Sr. U.S. Intelligence

Official: If I could just jump in for a second. I think the concept that affiliates adopting core al-Qaida's global jihadist message, it really - if you look at AQAP as a prime example of this, AQAP is determined to maintain both a local jihad, as well as a global jihad.

And proficiency at the global jihad is what is drawing, as (Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism Official) said, foreign operatives, it's what gives it its kind of street "cred" in many ways. And so I don't see AQAP giving up that intent or

desire to attack the West in the West's backyard. So I see that very much as a distinct possibility and that they will keep trying.

I think it's also important, though, I don't necessarily see that it's a complete disconnect between a group like AQAP trying to do this and also lone actors. The more that you see attempts by AQAP, even just attempts, whether they're as successful or not to attack the West, the more that that will resonate with the lone actors and give them hope, give them ideas.

What we've seen over the years is that, and one of the changes that we've seen in al-Qaida itself, is that rather than only going for kind of the big attacks, they're also now willing to go for a much more individualistic jihad as well.

So AQAP's admonishment to people to stay in place and commit jihad, that only resonates if AQAP is a strong actor and is seen as in some way carrying the mantle of global jihad.

Michael Birmingham: Okay. Thanks, Pam. Next question.

Coordinator: The next question comes from Mark Hosenball. Your line is open.

Mark Hosenball: Excuse me, I'm a bit squeaky today. I just wanted to ask to what extent the Arab  
Reuters Spring had two potential results or to what extent the results of the Arab Spring affected the counterterrorism business?

First of all, to what extent did the Arab Spring result in the release of people from jail in places like Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Tunisia, potentially dangerous people and what happened to them?



And Number 2, to what extent did the Arab Spring result in the dismantling, degrading, you know, dysfunction of the sort of security agencies in that region in those countries that were key U.S. partners in counterterrorism, and what is the balance of equities on both of those points after more than a year of Arab Spring?

Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism

Official: Well, obviously the Arab Spring is a work in progress. We're not done with it yet. I'll try and give you a bit of a report card on those factors that you just cited.

First on releases, absolutely people who were held in prisons, particularly in Egypt, that were held on various charges from petty crime to serious terrorism charges were released.

Security forces that were part of the reason why the broad spectrum of Egyptians and Libyans and Tunisians mounted the opposition in the first place, disappeared and really that replacement security are still pretty immature.

So, that can be a relatively dangerous combination of more extremists on the street and fewer security officials to actually watch them. I do think that all of the Arab Spring countries, certainly in North Africa, to date recognize it is in their own interests to make sure that jihadist organizations, al-Qaida and whatnot, don't make progress in their countries.

You know, we see improvements in their ability to distinguish between, real terrorists and opponents to the regime, but it really is a mixed bag. I think what Robert said on the damage to the global jihad, the tenants of the global jihad from bin Laden is really true.

And I think that what we've seen in the region is a much less popular message. The bin Laden message doesn't resonate very well in the vast majority of the Arab

world. But we're not really that worried about the vast majority, we're talking about the 1% of the 1%. So, you know, it's obviously up to us to improve our - to make sure that the trend goes in the right direction.

Second Sr. U.S.

Intelligence Official: Can I just foot stomp, to the last point. And that is to say that I think on balance I find the upside greater than the downside. That doesn't mean there won't be downsides, as (Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism Official) explained. It doesn't mean it won't create opportunities from those 0.1%, 0.1%.

But on the whole, the movement to democratic principles and representation, and the sooner these governments - new governments, as (Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism Official) said, still maturing start addressing the core concern that quite frankly we're driving extremism in some cases to unemployment and disparity and incomes and all those, the better.

And so I do think it's in their interests, these new governments' interests to make progress to advance across most of their populations. Thanks.

Michael Birmingham: I just want to reiterate the entire Q&A is on background. Next question please.

Coordinator: The next question comes from Catherine Herridge. Your line is open.

Catherine Herridge: Thanks for having the call this afternoon. What's the status of Omar Hammami?  
FOX News Is the bomb maker al-Asiri still focused on U.S. aviation? And is it correct that there was another package that was detected in Europe and the Middle East in the last six months?

Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism

Official: Hammami is making YouTube videos all over Somalia asking us Americans and anyone else for help. He thinks he's about to be arrested by one of the other factions of Shabaab. This is by his own admission.

You know, as my - I think he is probably still wandering around Shabaab probably looking for a new mentor, but he's clearly worried about his future, given the distrust of some of the leadership that Shabaab have of him.

Specifically on al-Asiri, I mean, he is still active. He's not focused on a single tactic or device, I suspect. He is a dangerous and creative expert in explosives. So and I don't - I'm not familiar with the report that you just cited of another bomb in the last six months.

Catherine Herridge: So nothing's been intercepted or picked up?

Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism

Official: Not that I know of, no.

Catherine Herridge: And just to be clear, these reports of Hammami's execution in Somalia have been discounted and there's evidence that he is in fact still alive?

Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism

Official: I believe he's still alive.

Catherine Herridge: Okay, thank you very much.

Coordinator: Next question comes from Greg Miller. Your line is open.

Greg Miller: Yes, thanks very much for doing this. I have a broader question and a more

Washington Post

narrow one. I just wonder, you know, a little under a year ago Panetta talked about a strategic defeat of al-Qaida being within reach. And I wonder if you would sort of - still sort of put it there? Is it any closer or farther away now?

And then more narrowly, I'm interested in if you can talk about the hard drives and the other materials seized from bin Laden the compound and the extent to which they have affected the assessments of al-Qaida and it's ties to regional organizations, and just how helpful the trove turned out to be looking back on it now a year later.

Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism

Official:

Yes, I'll do the strategic defeat question and (Sr. U.S. Intelligence Official) will handle the trove question. Yes, you know, this isn't a science where we have a yardstick that says, "We're halfway towards strategic defeat. We're 60% of the way." It's not like being on a treadmill.

I think it's clear that we've made progress toward defeating al-Qaida the organization. As I said before, I think we - it's really hard for me to conceive of declaring victory or announcing that we've achieved strategic defeat when, you know, you still have active affiliates. You still have propaganda coming out of Pakistan and a variety of other places. You have in the United Kingdom, for example, a number of active networks.

So, I mean, the ideology lives, the movement is still alive and relatively healthy. So, you know, I think it is a very useful exercise for us and for you all to think about, you know, how do you conceive of the defeat of an organization like al-Qaida? But I think, you know, I've said in the past determining whether or not we've achieved strategic defeat may be more a question for historians than for analysts.

Sr. U.S. Intelligence

Official: On the question of the documents themselves, the documents provide us really an unfiltered look at what's going on in al-Qaida or what was going on in al-Qaida at the time. And that's really important. I caveat there to say that it was not a holistic book. It's not encyclopedic from the standpoint of that there is everything. So we do look at it as this was pieces of a puzzle.

I would say that also it provided us some tremendous insights on al-Qaida's strategy and the personalities that are likely to remain useful for years to come, much like we find with debriefing and other pieces of information we gather. These are, again, all things that we can continually go back to reference to put, again, pieces of that puzzle together.

Greg Miller: And was it illuminating on the relationships with affiliate groups and other...

Sr. U.S. Intelligence

Official: Well, it definitely sharpened our understanding on command and control that, you know, at the time bin Laden still mattered. It gave us much more of an insight into the strategic agenda and intent and his desire and efforts to still maintain contact with the affiliates.

He was thinking about the Arab Spring. He was talking to folks about ideas on how to handle that. You know, we also saw that he was concerned about issues of bench - really bench strength, if you will, and that safe haven was going to continue to be important. And so I think ideas on how to exploit some of the issues we talked about earlier that are happening in the Arab Spring, how to position themselves.

And then the last thing I would say is that it really continued to highlight for us the need to protect our own operational security from a standpoint of they were

monitoring not just kind of what's happening in the Arab Spring, what's happening in the world, but the speeches and the tracking press statements and all kinds of other items to look for vulnerabilities and to look for ways to continue to mount their fight.

So, again, I think using the idea that being a treasure trove that's not an inaccurate statement. These documents are really going to continue to pay dividends for many years to come.

Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism

Official: I think we also saw indications of the sort of classical headquarters versus the field mentality where headquarters thinks they know better and instructing the field to do things. But the field would come back and say, "Boss, you may not know exactly what sort of stress we're under." So there was a bit of a disconnect.

Michael Birmingham: Thanks, Greg.

Greg Miller: Okay.

Coordinator: The next question comes from Jason Ryan. Your line is open.

Jason Ryan: Hi, thanks for having the call. Just wondering if you could describe the footprint you see of al-Qaida in Iraq inside Syria, and I guess any estimates you have on their precedent operatives that are in the country there.

Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism

Official: I would describe al-Qaida in Iraq, the phase in Syria right now is mostly, I mean it's not aspirational, it's more than aspirational, but it's early. I think they're figuring out right now how do you best insert yourself in a situation that is both

fluid and dangerous and probably, even from their perspective, pretty complicated.

You have a fractured Syrian opposition, most of whom are not Salafis. They're not like-minded. There are probably some religious elements affiliated with a former Muslim Brotherhooder.

So I think, I mean the first thing that al-Qaida has to do is to take a temperature of what's going on in Syria, who are their most likely allies, and then how do they fit into that mosaic?

One of the pieces of evidence that we've cited, which is not definitive by any means, is the use of the relatively large random suicide attacks against groups of people that the Syrian opposition themselves have really not used. They've been relatively careful about not indiscriminately killing other Syrians.

In fact that, I think, learning from their lessons in Iraq, I suspect AQ leadership is also opposed to that sort of tactic because they know well what happened in Iraq they want to avoid the same mistake in Syria and they want to fit in better.

So I think it's going to be a challenge. I think there are some AQ guys in Syria. I think they intend to put more effort into it, but I think it will be a challenge for them.

The Syrians are not necessarily going to be receptive to that sort of - if it becomes commonly known in Syria that al-Qaida is a major force in the opposition and Assad himself has painted the opposition as al-Qaida, I think the opposition would resist that pretty strongly.

Official: If I could just add just a couple of points. One, I think that Syria provides AQI really with some opportunities that it's been looking for for a long time. And that is to, be a protector of Sunnis in the Levant.

AQI didn't always see itself as just having a role only in Iraq. They've long said that they wanted something more regional. And I think also, as (Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism Official) mentioned, the - some of the tactics that we are seeing in Syria are - have all the hallmarks of AQI attack.

And then the last thing I would say is that al-Qaida, core al-Qaida if you will, was caught somewhat flat-footed on the Arab Spring. They had more time on something like Syria, which in and of itself has been going on for quite some time now, to be a bit more, if you will, have a bit more planning about what they're going to do there.

So I think we will see a hand, but I think you will see it, as (Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism Official) said, a bit more trying to give direction to AQI and help guide them.

Michael Birmingham: Thanks, Jason. We have time for about two more questions.

Coordinator: The next question comes from Dina. Dina your line is open.

Dina Templeton-Raston: This is Dina Templeton-Raston. Can you hear me?

NPR

Michael Birmingham: Thanks, Dina. Go ahead.



Dina Templeton-Raston: Okay, thanks. Can you give us a little bit of an idea about foreign fighters with Shabaab? Is Somalia still the place where foreign jihadi want-to-be's are flocking to get into them say, Yemen, and they won't get caught?

Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism

Official: I think I wouldn't say that any longer. I think this was true a couple of years ago, particularly when the Ethiopians were 2008, 2009, heavily invested in Somalia. We have many new developments since then, both the famine and the leadership split. I think Somalia has become a pretty difficult place to operate for foreign operatives.

Dina Templeton-Raston: So could you put a number on the number of foreign fighters who are there?

Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism

Official: I would say in the dozens, perhaps the high dozens, you know, not what it once was. Somalia itself is such a tribal, xenophobic, difficult place to live if you're not a Somali tribesman. I think a lot of the foreign fighters actually figured that out.

In one of the debates within the Shabaab, it said whether or not to support the foreign fighters external attack. I think the foreign fighter presence there just found that to be a very difficult environment.

I think Yemen is clearly a much more popular destination and they've moved there. It was - it became Somalia. In the quest for a good honest adventure, I think Yemen is probably on top of the list now.

Sr. U.S. Intelligence

Official: And can I just caution a bit? When you look at foreign fighters in Somalia, part of it is definitional. If you're going to look at it as non-Somali defendant versus

Somali defendant, I would say we probably say Somali defendant foreign fighters that includes individuals not just in the U.S.

You have ethnic Somali individuals in Europe you have some from other Middle Eastern countries. So I would think maybe those numbers might go higher. But if you're looking at just strictly kind of Western, European foreign fighters who are not of Somali descent, I would agree with (Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism Official) as kind of a low number.

Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism

Official: Actually that's a really good distinction because you do have two distinct groups of Somalians, those who are fighting for Somalia and those who are in Somalia as a launch pad. (Sr. U.S. Intelligence Official) is exactly right.

Michael Birmingham: Okay, thanks, Dina. We've got time for one more question.

Coordinator: Next question will come from Cami McCormick. Your line is open.

Cami McCormick: Yes, hi, thank you. I was wondering, you talked about a reduced chance of a sophisticated multi-pronged attack using nuclear and biological. I'm wondering if CBS News you've seen any new tactics or trends that are emerging that you're most concerned about?

Sr. U.S. Counterterrorism

Official: I think (Sr. U.S. Intelligence Official) identified earlier, this trend towards individual jihad where both al-Qaida core and the affiliates are encouraging its

members or extremists around the world to essentially look around at their own environment, see what is most - the most viable option.

They do tend to come back to explosive devices. They haven't picked up random shootings or snipers too much yet. But, the Merah example, or Ft. Hood, the more people do that the more copycat sort of attacks we see.

The al-Qaida itself as an organization has really stuck to an M.O. that, you're using explosives to attack major transportation, economically important targets, and we don't see much of a change in that. But the shift from a centrally managed jihad to one that is sort of much more individualized makes that's a much more difficult judgment to make.

Sr. U.S. Intelligence

Official: I would add another one that I think we need to be concerned about. We talk about kidnap for ransom from the standpoint of generating funds. But I think also kidnapping from a state - from an ability to actually generate headlines is something that, we're worried about.

The idea of taking Westerners hostage and being able to actually use that to leverage, whether it be press or attempt to leverage policy, is one that I think we may start to see more of in the future.

Michael Birmingham: Okay. Thank you, Cami. And I'd like to thank everybody for joining us today  
That will conclude our background briefing. Thank you.

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