



**Written Statement for House Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa,
and International Terrorism**

Examining the Global Terrorism Landscape

**By Mr. Ali H. Soufan
Founder of The Soufan Center
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About The Soufan Center

The Soufan Center (TSC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to serving as a resource and forum for research, analysis, and strategic dialogue related to global security issues and emergent threats. TSC fills a niche-role by producing independent, quality research and hosting proactive conversations in order to effectively equip thought leaders, policy makers, governments, bi- and multilateral institutions, media, and those in the non-profit and academic communities to engage in strategic security-related practices. Our work focuses on a broad range of complex security issues—from international and domestic terrorism, to humanitarian crisis analysis, to refugee and immigrant issues, and more.

The Soufan Center is a 501c3 non-profit organization.

About Ali Soufan

Ali Soufan is the Founder of The Soufan Center. Mr. Soufan is a former FBI Supervisory Special Agent who investigated and supervised highly sensitive and complex international terrorism cases, including the East Africa Embassy Bombings, the attack on the USS Cole, and the events surrounding 9/11. He is the Chief Executive Officer of The Soufan Group and Founder of The Soufan Center.



The Threat Landscape: Understanding the Salafi-jihadist and Shia-extremist Threat

Testimony of Mr. Ali Soufan,

Founder of The Soufan Center

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INTRODUCTION

Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, distinguished members: Thank you for hearing my testimony today.

During this session on the global terrorism landscape, my aim is to shed light not only on the existing “hot spots” or relative strength of terrorist organizations, but how these movements have evolved over time. It remains insufficient simply to know the number of foreign fighters that traveled abroad, or the geographical areas of particular concern today. While that information is important, to truly eradicate this threat we must understand the geopolitical context, the ways in which networks are formed, and why the terrorist ideology is able to achieve enduring resonance with individuals and groups. Terrorism never operates in a vacuum, and with that today I hope to clarify how the threat functions in a larger strategic context.



Nearly eight years to the day after Osama bin Laden was brought to justice, and despite ongoing military and intelligence efforts as part of the Global War on Terror, we have defeated neither the organization bin Laden founded, nor the wider Salafi-jihadist movement . On the contrary, al-Qaeda’s fighting strength today is an order of magnitude larger than it was on the day bin Laden died—and that does not count the tens of thousands more who have pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda’s breakaway rival, the so-called Islamic State (IS). In addition to the threat stemming from Salafi-jihadist terrorism, the sectarian violence that has become synonymous with conflicts in the Middle East has given rise to and empowered pro-Iranian militant groups across the region, many of which have already been designated terrorist organizations both by the U.S. and other states in the international community.

In my years of tracking, analyzing, and ultimately trying to disrupt these terrorist organizations, I draw four main conclusions of the threat stemming from terrorism, which is indeed more significant today than it was on September 11, 2001.

THE RESILIENCE OF IDEOLOGY:

First, we must recognize the resilience of the ideology. In 1989, bin Laden left Afghanistan in disgrace when his rash miscalculations at the Battle of Jalalabad led to the deaths of hundreds of Arab fighters. Welcomed in Sudan, bin Laden set up a network that brought together other foreign fighters who had traveled to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets but were no longer welcomed in their home countries. When he was ejected from Sudan under international pressure, bin Laden returned to Afghanistan, where al-Qaeda evolved into a hierarchical organization. The establishment of operational bases, training camps and a clear command and control structure enabled it to direct and execute spectacular attacks. First the 1998 East Africa Embassy Bombings, then the 2000 USS Cole Bombings, and ultimately the September 11 attacks on the U.S. homeland. After 9/11, we responded swiftly, and bin Laden was on the run. Instead of al-Qaeda imploding, however, it mutated to fit the new reality, morphing into a series of franchises and affiliate groups spanning the globe from North Africa to South East Asia. More importantly, the organization bin Laden created became a message. A message that outlasted bin Laden himself.



We have enjoyed numerous tactical victories. Most of the individuals that comprised al-Qaeda's operational leadership on the eve of 9/11 are either dead or in jail. Almost all of the territory captured by IS has been reclaimed. Tactically, there is nothing we cannot do. Yet, for all of our tactical successes, they amount to a strategic failure. A strategic failure of truly understanding why the ideology that organizations like al-Qaeda have spread across the Islamic world is so resilient. The 'caliphate' may have been defeated in the physical sense, but the dynamics that allowed the so-called Islamic State to exist in the first place and al-Qaeda to expand, continue to spread in so many places around the world. Only by defeating the conditions that allowed the appeal of that narrative in the hearts and minds of so many around the world, can we finally win.

SECTARIANISM:

Second, sectarianism has become the geopolitical currency of the Middle East and terrorist organizations have become experts at exploiting this reality for their own gain. Between 2003 and 2006, the terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi turned al-Qaeda in Iraq into a machine for murdering Shia Muslims as well as fighting the United States, and thereby bequeathed Iraq a sectarian bloodbath that continues to this day. Zarqawi did not invent the concept of sectarianism, which has figured in the modern Middle East power struggles since the ayatollahs took power in Iran in 1979; but its importance has grown with Iraq's transition to a Shia-led government and the Iranian-Saudi proxy wars in Syria and Yemen, and, of course, the rebirth of Zarqawi's movement as today's Islamic State. Sectarian hatred was never an explicit part of bin Laden's agenda—his mother, after all, is an Alawite, a member of the same Shia sect as Bashar al-Assad—but violence against Shia Muslims and their cultural symbols have proven a potent recruiting tool for the global Salafi-jihadist movement, as well as its Iranian-backed opponents.

Unfortunately, we should not expect governments in the region to abandon sectarianism as a rallying cry anytime soon, as it has become the primary tool for competing states to solidify power and support. Principally, I am speaking about the struggle for regional hegemony between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which has prolonged already bloody conflicts and lent them a vicious sectarian edge. Although



both Saudi Arabia and Iran heavily employ the tactic of sectarianism, their strategies are widely different in both execution and success.

Saudi Arabia and its allies have resorted to funding Sunni groups on the ground in local conflicts, often with little regard for these groups' direct or indirect links to transnational terrorist networks, such as al-Qaeda. Today, in the complex civil war in Yemen, Saudi Arabia and its allies find themselves in a direct military war with an Iranian proxy, and in effect, on the same side as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). AQAP has strengthened its ties to Yemen's Sunni tribes and militias, to the point where it would be difficult, if not impossible, to support those groups without indirectly supporting al-Qaeda.^{1,2} In addition, and in order to counter Iranian influence across the Muslim world, Saudi Arabia exports radical religious education which preaches dangerous sectarian narratives that promote and result in sectarian, religious, and ethnic violence. What we witnessed recently in South Asia is an example. The combination of a rise in identity politics and the funding of extremist madrassas that promote a violently radical version of Islam, previously foreign to the area, has contributed to a rising tide of radicalization and extremism within the region. Radical religious influence has resulted in an increase in 'jihadi' violence in Pakistan, Indian Kashmir, and Bangladesh.³ As a January 2019 report by The Soufan Center highlighted, Salafi-jihadist groups, including both IS and al-Qaeda, have long viewed South Asia as fertile ground to gain new territory and recruits, and militant propaganda has highlighted injustices against Muslims in Bangladesh, Myanmar, India, and Sri Lanka. Importantly, the amplification of an inter-communal divide in the region has the potential of serving the jihadists' cause and accelerating sectarian violence.⁴

¹ Michael, Maggie, Trish Wilson, and Lee Keath. "AP Investigation: US Allies, Al-Qaida Battle Rebels in Yemen." *AP NEWS*, August 7, 2018. <https://apnews.com/f38788a561d74ca78c77cb43612d50da>.

² Zimmerman, Katherine, "AQAP Post-Arab Spring and the Islamic State," American Enterprise Institute, 30 June 2017. Accessed 25 Jan 2018. www.aei.org/publication/aqap-post-arab-spring-and-the-islamic-state/

³ Pillalamarri, Akhilesh. "The Radicalization of South Asian Islam: Saudi Money and the Spread of Wahhabism." *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, December 20, 2014. <http://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2014/12/20/the-radicalization-of-south-asian-islam-saudi-money-and-the-spread-of-wahhabism/>.

⁴ "Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS): The Nucleus of Jihad in South Asia." The Soufan Center. <https://thesoufancenter.org/research/al-qaeda-in-the-indian-subcontinent-aqis-the-nucleus-of-jihad-in-south-asia/>.



Iran, on the other hand, has pioneered a sophisticated and intricate strategy that combines insurgent and state power in a potent combination—a strategy evident today in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Qods Force (IRGC-QF) is tasked with building pro-Iranian armed factions within the region into political movements with progressively increasing influence and capabilities. One man is recognized as the principal architect of each of these policies: Major General Qassem Soleimani, the long-time chief of the Quds Force. More than anyone else, Soleimani has been responsible for the creation of an arc of influence—which Iran terms its “Axis of Resistance”—extending from the Gulf of Oman through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon to the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Today, with Assad’s impending victory in Syria’s civil war, this Iranian alliance has become stable enough that Qassem Soleimani, should he be so inclined, could drive his car from Tehran to Lebanon’s border with Israel without being stopped. And, as the Mossad chief Yossi Cohen has pointed out, the same land bridge would be open to truckloads of rockets bound for Iran’s main regional proxy, the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah (Party of God).⁵ Iran’s “Axis of Resistance” has been built on the efforts of proxies controlled by Soleimani in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen—and on the marriage between state and militant power that Iran has been able to cultivate and nurture in each of those countries. So far, Iran’s playbook enables it to accomplish its objectives without invasions or conventional military conflict.

In addition, Iran displayed significant logistical expertise in recruiting and deploying Shia fighters primarily from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Syrian battlefield. Between 2013-2017, the IRGC-QF reportedly recruited and deployed as many as 50,000 or more Shia fighters in Syria, although estimates vary widely.⁶

Those who suffer from sectarian violence are the people and those who benefit are the terrorists. To provide but one example, in Yemen, which the UN has described as the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today, al-Qaeda in the Arabian

⁵ Ronen Bergman and Raz Zimmt, “Israel’s most dangerous enemy: Who are you, Hajj Qassem Soleimani?” YNet News, July 4, 2018.

⁶ Jamal, Ahmad Shuja. “The Fatemiyoun Army: Reintegration into Afghan Society.” Special Report. United States Institute for Peace, March 2019. https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2019-03/sr_443-the_fatemiyoun_army_reintegration_into_afghan_society-pdf_0.pdf.



Peninsula has exploited the conflict to expand from 1,000 fighters at the beginning of the war to between 6,000 to 7,000 today—fifteen to seventeen times the size of al-Qaeda as a whole on 9/11.^{7,8}

THE ARAB SPRING:

Third, the Arab Spring has shifted the Salafi-jihadi strategy. In the months before bin Laden's death, the uprisings across the Arab world dissolved his keen focus on targeting the United States. To bin Laden, the wave of state failure sweeping the region in the first half of 2011 provided him with a major opportunity. The Arab Spring represented a pivotal moment to implement the chaos strategy of al-Qaeda's handbook, *The Management of Savagery*. Bin Laden instructed his organization to move away from strictly targeting the United States and her allies, to instead exploiting local vacuums that followed the collapse of the various Arab regimes, fomenting instability, building alliances with local groups, and pressuring local populations in areas where Al-Qaeda operates to depend on the terror group for security and much needed social services.⁹ This local strategy is now as much a part of the agenda of al-Qaeda franchises as are the acts of terrorism aimed to dismantle the world order led by the United States.

On both aspects of this agenda, AQAP is in the lead, but we see this gradualist and grassroots approach practiced by al-Qaeda affiliates across the world. In Somalia, despite years of heavy fighting with peacekeeping forces from neighboring countries, as well as a steady U.S.-backed counter-terrorism campaign, al-Shabaab remains the dominant entity, especially in rural areas in the south, where it retains the ability to govern the territory it holds.¹⁰ The group's January 2019 attack on a hotel in Nairobi,

⁷ "Chapter 6. Foreign Terrorist Organizations." Bureau of Counterterrorism: U.S. Department of State, 2013. <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2013/224829.htm>.

⁸ Umarov, Kairat. "Letter Dated 16 July 2018 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) Concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Entities Addressed to the President of the Security Council," July 16, 2018.

http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2018/705&referer=/english/&Lang=E.

⁹ "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud," Office of the Director of National Intelligence [document captured during the Navy SEAL raid on bin Laden's Abbottabad residence]. <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/resources/bin-laden-bookshelf>

¹⁰ "IntelBrief: Hotel Attack in Nairobi Demonstrates Regional Threat Posed by Al-Shabab." The Soufan Center, January 17, 2019. <http://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-hotel-attack-in-nairobi-demonstrates-regional-threat-posed-by-al-shabab/>.



Kenya was a shocking reminder of its continuing capacity to wreak havoc and destruction. In the Sahel region of Africa, AQIM has merged with three other groups to form Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), an al-Qaeda-affiliated organization boasting as many as 2,000 fighters as of September 2018.¹¹ JNIM has continued to carry out attacks on French, UN, and local government interests throughout the region, including the coordinated assaults in Burkina Faso in March 2018.¹²

The picture in Syria is even more complicated. As of January 2019, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS),—the largest insurgent faction in Syria, with as many as 20,000 fighters—stood at the head of a coalition of rebel groups that have undisputed control over Idlib governorate and parts of the neighboring governorates of Aleppo and Hama, making HTS and its partners the de facto government over some three million people.^{13,14} HTS, is, in fact, an umbrella organization that consists of many different jihadist groups. Some of these groups, like Tanzim Hurras al-Din, are totally loyal to al-Qaeda but the level of loyalty varies according to each group. With respect to HTS, there is a divergence of interests at times with al-Qaeda Central, but they have more similarities than differences and share common connections and linkages in the broader jihadist universe.

In our comprehensive 2015 report on IS, we predicted that it would go from a proto-state to an underground terrorist organization, which is what we are seeing today. Even though IS' territory has been retaken, which is indeed significant, the group's ability to inspire and take advantage of existing conditions in different places is very much intact. Most IS provinces across the world build on pre-existing conflicts with sectarian, ethnic, and religious divisions. This is true from Boko Haram in Nigeria to Ansar Bayt al Maqdis in the Sinai to Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines. The current strategy employed by IS appears to be taken directly from

¹¹ Center for Strategic & International Studies, "Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM)," September 25, 2018. https://www.csis.org/programs/transnational-threats-project/terrorism-backgrounders/jamaat-nasr-al-islam-wal-muslimin#_edn2

¹² Ndiaga, Thiam. "Al Qaeda Affiliate Claims Responsibility for Burkina Faso Attacks." Reuters, March 3, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-burkina-security-idUSKCN1GF0GS>.

¹³ "Syria: Who's in Control of Idlib?" BBC, September 7, 2018, sec. World. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-45401474>.

¹⁴ "IntelBrief: From Bad to Worse in Syria's Idlib Province." The Soufan Center, January 14, 2019. <http://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-from-bad-to-worse-in-syrias-idlib-province/>.



al-Qaeda's playbook: rewriting the global jihadist narrative from a regional perspective—a narrative that has local roots but global aspirations. IS' global reach has to do with two factors: first, the international network of foreign terrorist fighters and, second, capitalizing on its brand to establish links with groups that already exist. We have to remember that around 45,000 individuals from over 110 countries joined IS.¹⁵ IS thus has an international cadre and is trying to recover from its defeat in Iraq and Syria by leveraging this global network. The recent attack in Sri Lanka is a horrific example in which a local group buys into the terror brand and operates to further its deadly agenda.

THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR:

Fourth, the war in Syria has exposed the true nature of the struggle underlying the current rise of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. One glance at the complicated lattice of strife enmeshing the contemporary Middle East is enough to suggest that the region has reverted to *intra*-civilizational conflict. Sunnis fight Shia, Persians battle Arabs, Turks struggle with Kurds, which manifests at a tribal, communal, and even neighborhood level.

The war in Syria morphed into more than just a civil war against a ruthless regime. It became a regional and, ultimately, international war. The war in Syria brought back history. It has provided the opportunity for many countries to try to reestablish their traditional spheres of influence. States like Iran, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and China all want to assert and expand their regional influences and as a consequence, the fault lines that existed in the 17th and 18th centuries are present today, from Crimea to Mosul.

The war in Syria also caused an unprecedented refugee crisis, which, coupled with the rise in identity politics in Europe, gave oxygen to another transnational violent movement that is unfolding in front of our very eyes: radical right-wing terrorism. These two dangerous networks feed off each other. When a Salafi-jihadist commits

¹⁵ “Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees.” The Soufan Center. Accessed April 29, 2019. <https://thesoufancenter.org/research/beyond-caliphate/>.



a terrorist attack, it benefits the right-wing terrorist. And when a right-wing terrorist commits an attack, the Salafi-jihadist terrorist benefits from it.

CONCLUSION:

I would like to leave you with some thoughts about the future of the jihadi threat. There is a growing crisis of leadership in the global jihadist movement. Ayman al-Zawahiri increasingly seems like a liability, as his lack of charisma has hampered al-Qaeda's ability to appeal to the younger generation. For IS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is isolated and on the run, and there are questions surrounding his succession and the future leadership of the Islamic State.

Hamza bin Laden's eventual rise to the top leadership position of al-Qaeda could be a lifeline, not only for the future of the organization itself, but for the global Salafi-Jihadi movement as a whole. The young Bin Laden might be uniquely positioned to once again unite the global jihadi terrorism under one banner.

Hamza Bin Laden exemplifies al-Qaeda's potential shift back to focus on the global jihad against the United States and our allies. In his public messages, Hamza calls on followers not to travel to theaters of jihad in the Muslim world, but instead to "[t]ake the battlefield from Kabul, Baghdad, and Gaza to Washington, London, Paris, and Tel Aviv."¹⁶ Indeed, Hamza often repeats, almost word-for-word, myriad anti-American phrases used by his father as early as the 1990s.¹⁷

Conflicts across the Middle East draw no nearer to a realistic solution and sectarianism is now an integral part of the strategy in the power competition between regional states. As a result, the security vacuum and humanitarian crises created by these conflicts are currently being exploited by both Salafi-jihadist and pro-Iranian militias to strengthen such organizations and expand their influence and support. In Iraq, for example, estimates suggest there are up to 100,000 Iraqi Shia militiamen, collectively known as Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), with the majority

¹⁶ Joscelyn, Thomas "Analysis: Osama bin Laden's Son Praises al Qaeda's Branches in New Message," Long War Journal, August 17, 2015. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/08/osama-bin-ladens-son-praises-alqaeda-branches-in-new-message.php>

¹⁷ Soufan, Ali. "Hamza Bin Ladin: From Steadfast Son to Al-Qa`ida's Leader in Waiting." Combating Terrorism Center at West Point 10, no. 8 (September 7, 2017): 1–8. <https://ctc.usma.edu/hamza-bin-ladin-from-steadfast-son-to-al-qaidas-leader-in-waiting/>



belonging to Iranian-backed groups. Iran is said to provide well over \$100 million per year worth of equipment to the Iraqi militias, and, despite IS being declared “defeated” in Iraq at the end of 2017, these militias still retain their independent capabilities and command structure.^{18,19}

It is my hope that I have managed to demonstrate that terrorism does not succeed or fail in a vacuum, but that the terrorist landscape of today operates in a larger strategic context. The resilience of the ideology coupled with sectarianism and prolonged conflicts across the Middle East due to geopolitical power-rivalry is what has given rise to what we are witnessing today.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony.

¹⁸ Iran Dramatically Shifts Iraq Policy to Confront Islamic State. Reuters, September 2, 2014.

¹⁹ Ned Parker. “Power Failure in Iraq as Militias Outgun State.” Reuters, October 21, 2015.