



Countering Today's Enduring and Adaptive Terrorist Threats: DIA's Role

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Introduction

Thank you Robert (Satloff) for that kind introduction. And I would also like to thank Matthew Levitt for inviting me to participate in this lecture series. It is an honor for me to be here.

The Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence sets a high standard for public education on a critical issue that likely will continue to challenge our nation for the foreseeable future. Thank you for contributing to that public dialogue – and by extension to the public consensus required for successful counterterrorism efforts.

Like some previous speakers here, I have spent my career in the intelligence profession. And so, in all honesty, before taking you up on the invitation, I had to overcome a visceral reluctance. What helped me do so was the fact that – so far – none of your previous Intelligence Community speakers have been struck by lightning following their remarks.

So I am hoping not to be the first who breaks that streak.

With that confession out of the way, I would like to spend a few minutes talking about the Defense Intelligence Agency and the contributions the agency is making against terrorism. As we all know, tomorrow marks the eighth anniversary of the

attacks on September 11th – a time for each of us to reflect on the terrible events of that day, those we lost, and the costs, risks and challenges associated with terrorism and all of its manifestations. Like many at the institute and in the audience today, the events of that day bear a special meaning for those in the Department of Defense and the Intelligence Community as we strive to understand and stay ahead of the highly adaptive trends in terrorism we are seeing in our operating environment.

Defense Intelligence Agency

First, let me set the stage with a few words about DIA – and the agency’s capabilities and role. DIA is both a member of the United States Intelligence Community and also a principal combat support agency within the Department of Defense.

Job one for DIA’s intelligence professionals is to understand foreign military intentions and capabilities and the threats they pose to the United States. DIA personnel do this by analyzing all-sources of intelligence.

All-source analysis is not unlike putting pieces of a puzzle together, except in our business we do not get all the pieces. We get some – and from that we try to divine the clearest picture possible.

Founded in 1961, in the midst of the Cold War, DIA was chartered to provide the Department of Defense with “unity of effort” across its intelligence functions while also strengthening the department’s ability to collect and analyze intelligence. Twenty-five years after its creation, the agency was designated a combat support agency under the Goldwater-Nichols legislation of 1986.

DIA provides all-source intelligence across the full spectrum of current and potential threats to military commanders and policymakers at the defense and national levels. This includes intelligence obtained by human sources and specialized technical collection.

The broad spectrum covered by DIA ranges from major nation-states such as North Korea, Iran, Russia and Syria all the way to non-state, sub-national terrorist groups such as Al-Qaida and its operational and nominal affiliates, and other groups including the FARC in Colombia, Hizballah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Today, the agency's top priority is Afghanistan-Pakistan – and providing the intelligence support to our military forces currently engaged in that region.

As you can see, DIA has a broad portfolio. And we could spend a whole day on any of the topics I mentioned. But today, in keeping with the stated purpose of the lecture series, I am going to zero in on the terrorism portion of that broad spectrum and talk about trends there.

Terrorism Trends

Before 9/11, our conceptual framework for the phenomenon of “terrorism” often was largely built upon groups with distinct structures, strict lines of command and control, and well-defined operating areas.

Today, the primary terrorist threat to our country’s interests—persons aligned with al-Qaida—has evolved from different but related groups into a more coherent movement under a common ideology.

The movement grew in a way that de-emphasizes rigid structures and delegates responsibility downward, even to individuals. As a consequence, it created a mechanism to generate and share resources that lies at the heart of al-Qaida’s resiliency.

Al-Qaida’s methods present serious challenges for anticipating and disrupting terrorist plots. Top leaders simply announce their priorities, which the group’s members and allies may interpret and execute against targets of their own choice.

This multi-echelon plotting by al-Qaida, its allies and sympathizers enables a span of terrorist violence across the world that is unprecedented in its unity of vision, regardless of the degree to which the overall command and control is splintered. Hundreds of attacks every year are committed by militants sanctioned by or under the name of al-Qaida.

Al-Qaida has also learned to select targets that maximize the political effects of its attacks. For example, the bombing of the Golden Mosque in Iraq in February 2006 killed no one, but sparked waves of sectarian violence. An attack on a Spanish commuter train contributed to a change of government.

So, where are we in our fight against al-Qaida? The record is mixed. On the one hand:

- We see continued terrorist attacks by supporters of an uncompromising ideology.
- Terrorists have learned to increase their lethality AND their political impact; and
- They are drawn to unstable and/or ungoverned territories where they fight, form bonds, draw recruits and further develop their trade.

On the other hand, there are reasons for optimism:

- U.S. and allied governments have impacted many of al-Qaida's most lethal capabilities. The group is forced to perpetually rebuild. I'm proud to say DIA was instrumental in many of these successes.
- The ideology driving al-Qaida is showing signs of wear and its popularity appears to be waning and more Muslim voices publicly challenge its tenets.

We can be proud of our successes and can only imagine what damage al-Qaida would have inflicted had the community of civilized nations not drawn together against this threat. Despite the successes, we still face determined adversaries who seek to adapt in ways that present fresh challenges.

- U.S. citizens are traveling abroad to fight with al-Qaida and its allies. News stories tell of young people from Somali communities in the United States who go overseas to join the ranks of al-Shabaab which seeks to create a radical Islamic government in Africa. Others travel to Pakistan and Afghanistan.
- The Pakistani group Lashkar-e Tayyiba with 10 assailants and simple weapons killed 164 people last year in a tourist-filled neighborhood in Mumbai, India. This kind of attack can be replicated in other urban centers by determined adversaries.
- Groups like Lebanese Hizballah, with the force multiplier of Iranian state sponsorship, continue to represent a substantial transnational threat. Well-known for its prominent bombings, hijackings and kidnappings, Hizballah recently achieved a new capability that carries disturbing implications. In 2006, this terrorist group successfully sustained a largely conventional fight against a nation-state with a tier one regional military capability.

Enduring and adaptive threats such as those I have mentioned are important problem-sets for the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Intelligence Community, our nation and many of our allies. The implications they present frequently transcend intelligence and cross into the policy realm.

And that really illuminates DIA's role: the intelligence we produce helps to inform policymakers at all levels, from the Secretary of Defense to the Oval Office to Capitol Hill.

At the same time, DIA's assessments also help military commanders understand risks and threats in areas in which they may operate, and inform their decisions about security for their soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines.

What I have laid on the table today represents a broad spectrum of tough challenges, threats and problem-sets. And our effort to provide actionable intelligence to our customers often generates new questions – or intelligence requirements that we task out to our nation's cadre of collectors, whether they fly aircraft and satellites, or conduct high-threat meetings with sources on battlefields or in foreign capitals.

In our search to provide customers with the critical advantage that comes with good intelligence, we are constantly adjusting our human and technical intelligence collection against targets that we think will produce new pieces of the puzzle. And we examine each new piece of intelligence that comes in. And we ask whether the new intelligence sharpens or contradicts our understanding of an issue.

Does it confirm something known? Reveal something unknown? Or is it a new data point seemingly unconnected to anything else that merely awaits other pieces of the puzzle before its full meaning can be understood?

That is the process we use as we seek to identify terrorism trends and understand their full implications on behalf of our customers – whether it is a 4-star combatant commander overseas, an assistant secretary of defense or the National Security Council or the President.

And those are the types of questions we ask as we look at the phenomenon of terrorism – and all of its variations and how it is adapting and evolving in different theaters around the world.

Final Thoughts

Terrorism remains, of course, a top intelligence priority for this nation. The fight against transnational terrorist groups such as Al-Qaida continues. Forward deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, the men and women of DIA continue to provide critical analytic and collection and targeting support to our armed forces.

As you can imagine, providing intelligence support for these ongoing operations places great demands upon our resources and people. In fact, DIA has more people deployed overseas now than at any time in its nearly 50-year history, many of whom are on their second or third deployment.

But that does not mean other potential threats and items of interest have gone away.

Far from it.

In addition to ongoing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, DIA personnel continue to monitor a broad range of ongoing events and potential threats, such as:

- Iranian, Syrian and North Korean missile programs, conventional force developments, proliferation, and weapons of mass destruction programs;
- Anti-satellite weapons;
- Russia's effort to restructure its military forces – the most ambitious in more than 50 years;
- Threats to our cyber infrastructure;
- China's continuing efforts to develop naval, air and missile forces for dominance along its periphery;
- Hostile foreign intelligence services; and
- Pakistani military operations in its tribal areas.

As Director of DIA, I have a fundamental responsibility to balance the demand for intelligence support to ongoing operations with the need to monitor these other threats, challenges or items of interest elsewhere.

Guarding against strategic surprise, even beyond the heavy demand of current operations, remains a core DIA mission.

And that presents a constant struggle: how do we balance our finite intelligence resources, personnel and capabilities in this highly complex operational environment we face today – one marked by a threat spectrum that is arguably broader than ever?

I will close on this cautionary note, one drawn as much from the history books as from the intelligence vaults:

Our current focus on ongoing operations against terrorism and in Iraq and Afghanistan is no guarantee that our nation's next conflict or challenge will emerge on the low end of the threat spectrum.

History wisely counsels that the last war – or in this case the current war – is often an imperfect indicator of the next war. Our fight today on the low end of the conventional spectrum does not preclude the possibility that the next challenge or conflict may emerge on the high end of the scale.

That reading of history underscores the need to maintain defense intelligence capabilities, including human intelligence and technical collection along with all-source analysis, so that we can always provide the intelligence advantage to our customers – whether they wear this uniform and lead troops in battle or are civilians wrestling with tough policy calls. And we have to do it against the full spectrum of threats and challenges – from low to high, at all times.

Doing so may be the best way to prevent strategic surprise – whether it originates from highly adaptive non-state groups like Hezbollah or on the high-end from aspiring regional, nation-state competitors.

With that -- I hope I have put enough meat on the table.

I would be happy to take your questions.

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