

Following the House Committee on Homeland Security  
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence  
Hearing on “The Persistent Threat: Al Qaeda’s Evolution and Resilience”

# Questions for the Record

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### **From Congressman Mike Gallagher**

1. Ms. Zimmerman, in your opening remarks you stated that Al Qaeda “has acted deliberately below the thresholds that would set off alarms in Washington.” Doesn’t the very nature of this threat mean that Washington needs to rethink what those thresholds are when it comes to the activities of transnational terrorist organizations?

Yes, the thresholds policymakers set to trigger an American response to transnational threat groups are insufficient. Smart adversaries such as al Qaeda and even Russia understand and operate below the threshold, all the while strengthening and pursuing their own objectives. Al Qaeda and others have learned to mask their threat to the United States by engaging in low-level activities that do not seem to affect American interests directly. However, the sum of these activities places these transnational groups directly in opposition to American interests.

The United States must both retain the thresholds that when met trigger an immediate and decisive response and lower its threshold against groups that are shaping an environment counter to American interests. Specifically, the United States should clearly identify and define as enemy all groups and individuals that subscribe to the Salafi-jihadi ideology and act to eliminate the threat they pose to the United States and the West as well as to limit their influence. The United States should work to prevent Salafi-jihadi groups from shaping the local environments to their benefit.

These actions must be part of a comprehensive strategy against the Salafi-jihadi base and are not necessarily defined as focused on the enemy or requiring the use of force. In fact, it is possible to weaken al Qaeda, ISIS, and other like-minded transnational organizations by breaking their ties to local communities, which requires focusing on the people and not the enemy.

2. While ISIS seeks to recruit followers of all stripes, Al Qaeda is known for having a stricter standard for recruiting members. How, if at all, has AQ changed its recruitment strategy in recent years? Do any of you believe AQ will need to change its recruiting to compete for influence with ISIS fighters in failed states like Libya and Yemen?

Al Qaeda's strict standards for recruits remain, though al Qaeda has adopted a battlefield posture that enables it attract fighters who operate in its interest, but who do not become full-blown members. It fields insurgent force commanders who lead militias comprised of local fighters who do not necessarily subscribe to al Qaeda's global vision, or in certain cases, its ideology. Ansar al Sharia in Yemen is an example of one such insurgent force that included non-al Qaeda fighters. The integration of al Qaeda elsewhere into the local insurgency, such as Syria and Mali, creates a network of al Qaeda operatives across multiple groups. These individuals help shape the group's actions to be in the interest of al Qaeda, but group membership does not require the same sort of vetting that membership of al Qaeda requires.

Al Qaeda will increase its efforts to capture the foreign fighter flows to direct them to key battlefields—Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Libya—as ISIS weakens in Iraq and Syria. The influx of foreign fighters will strengthen al Qaeda further and expand its capacity to conduct attacks in the West.

Al Qaeda's recruitment in failed states like Libya and Yemen will increasingly target non-violent Islamists and Salafis in order to capture a broader segment of the population. The loss of political space coupled with targeted campaigns against political Islamists and Salafis threatens the prospect of these groups in any future state. They are threatened, and al Qaeda will exploit their fears to recruit individuals into the Salafi-jihadi camp, where the slogan is “bullets, not ballots” for Islam.

3. Does ISIS have the resources or willingness to challenge Al Qaeda in Yemen given the ongoing exodus of ISIS fighters from Iraq and Syria?

ISIS does not have the resources to challenge al Qaeda in Yemen. It is unlikely to be able to do so even should ISIS leadership prioritize the Yemeni theater. Skilled ISIS fighters from Iraq and Syria could surge ISIS's capabilities and resources in Yemen should they enter the Yemeni battlefield. These fighters would restore ISIS to at least the strength at which it was operating in 2015-2016, enabling ISIS to resume mass-casualty attacks, especially in southern Yemen. But ISIS did not pose a serious threat to al Qaeda's position in Yemen even at its height.

Al Qaeda's source of strength in Yemen is its relationship with local communities, which al Qaeda has cultivated for over two decades. Al Qaeda's composition as a Yemeni organization willing to defend and protect local communities makes the population more willing to tolerate al Qaeda's presence, even while rejecting its ideology. ISIS is unlikely to generate popular support because it operates outside of customary law (*'urf*) and because it targets groups that the local communities do not necessarily see as legitimate targets, such as unarmed police recruits.