

Al-Qaeda's new tactic: prison breaks

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Is it a coincidence or an effective new strategy that a spate of astonishing prison breaks in Iraq, Libya and Pakistan carried out [by al-Qaeda](#) has coincided with the movement's leader promising to free its members worldwide - including those held in Guantánamo Bay?

[Ayman al-Zawahiri](#), based in the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands, has been designated leader of al-Qaeda since the killing of his mentor Osama bin Laden in 2011. In his first audio recording for many months - posted on the internet at the end of July - he slammed US treatment of hunger striking inmates in Guantánamo and swore to free them all: We pledge to God that we will spare no effort to free all our prisoners . . . very oppressed Muslim everywhere."

Interpol sees a link: on Saturday it issued a [global security alert advising states to increase their vigilance](#) against al-Qaeda attacks. Interpol's alert followed a [US worldwide travel alert and the closure of 21 US embassies](#) in the Muslim world as a result of a feared wave of attacks. That is already happening in what looks like a new drive by al-Qaeda to smash its way into vulnerable prisons to re-enlist its own fighters. On July 22 "[al-Qaeda in Iraq](#)" launched well-planned attacks on the prisons of Abu Ghraib and Taji, freeing as many as 800 prisoners. Iraq has seen a huge uptick of violence by al-Qaeda and other Sunni extremist groups largely aimed at killing Shias - some 700 people were killed in July alone.

On July 27, [an attack in Benghazi, Libya, freed more than 1,000 inmates](#) - some incarcerated for acts of terrorism, although the majority were more conventional criminals. On July 29 more than 150 heavily armed Pakistani Taliban, who are affiliated to al-Qaeda, [rode into the town of Dera Ismail Khan](#) in northwestern Pakistan in dozens of vehicles and motorbikes. They attacked the prison from three directions, freeing more than 250 prisoners. Militants from Uzbekistan and Chechnya also took part.

Now it becomes clearer that Mr Al-Zawahiri's appeal seems to be directed at al-Qaeda groups everywhere to free their prisoners from jails - even those in Europe or the US. The grouping appears to be taking advantage of the turmoil and protests across the Middle East and south Asia to free its most dedicated and committed followers in jail. This poses huge new problems for global security, just when the US and Nato is claiming the demise of al-Qaeda due to drone strikes and better counter-terrorism tactics.

Do not underestimate the potential impact of prison breaks. According to Peter Bergen, a security analyst, a 2006 prison break in the Yemeni capital Sana'a led to the creation of [al-Qaeda in the Arabian peninsula](#). The Afghan Taliban launched spectacular attacks against the Sarposa prison in Kandahar twice - in 2008 and 2011 - freeing almost 2,000 of its associates.

Al-Qaeda has managed to set some of its most battle-hardened members free. The attacks follow a similar pattern - as if there were a single training manual. First, more than 100 fighters drive into town - usually in some kind of disguise, such as police uniforms. Another 100 or more are deployed outside town to prevent reinforcements arriving and to allow the prisoners to escape on designated routes in empty buses.

Suicide bombers then blast their way through the walls or the main gate of the prison as follow up fighters kill any remaining guards. The attackers already have layout plans of the prison. They make a beeline for militants first - then free the rest of the inmates. Finally, everyone makes an orderly escape.

The [Pakistan Taliban](#) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan has recently formed a new organisation called Ansar al Aseer that is specifically designed to free prisoners and support their families. Until recently, the usual tactic for freeing its jailed fighters was by kidnapping prominent locals or foreign tourists, then demanding ransoms and prisoner releases. However, governments are now increasingly refusing to oblige. Assaulting prisons is clearly the next best thing.

It is easy to blame the weakness or ineptness of governments where such prison breaks have taken place, but the truth is that released prisoners will help to revive al-Qaeda in many parts of the world and provide an enormous morale boost to its ranks. That only increases the chances of a revival in global terrorism on targets in Europe and the US. We have just entered a new phase in the war against terrorism.

The writer is author of 'Descent into Chaos: The US and the disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia'