

Al-Qa'eda Has Learnt To Adapt In Adversity

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The more al-Qa'eda is whittled down - its cells broken up, its leaders captured - the quicker it transforms itself into new shapes and forms to survive. The bombing in Bali demonstrates that al-Qa'eda is no longer a party with a central core as existed in Afghanistan before September 11, but a global movement whose essence is now local.

Its belief system is still rigid in its hatred towards the United States but it is also adaptable to local circumstances, causes and issues.

Al-Qa'eda has become a multi-headed monster much like a child's transformer toy. Twist the toy around and it shows up many different faces and egos.

The Bali bombing was preceded by attacks on US troops in Kuwait, Afghanistan and the Philippines, several suicide attacks against foreigners and Christians in Pakistan and the assault on the French oil tanker outside Yemen. Then there were the lesser known, recent attempted attacks that were foiled by security forces in Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Germany.

The attacks that occurred all fit the al-Qa'eda picture as we have come to know it - kill Americans, attack large economic targets symbolic of capitalism, attack to embarrass pro-Western rulers in the Muslim world.

But there is also a local picture that needs to be understood. In Bali the target was Australians whom Indonesian extremists - both nationalist and religious - blame for the country's debacle over East Timor.

In Pakistan the target has been Pakistani Christians, whom local militant groups believe are being funded by the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury and almost everyone else to Christianise the country.

This local agenda has come about in the aftermath of al-Qa'eda's defeat in Afghanistan. Thousands of al-Qa'eda militants fled, either back home or to neighbouring countries where they were told to co-ordinate with local groups and to reorganise.

Pakistan is the prime example of this new-style co-operation, because of the needs of international and domestic jihads. Pakistani militant groups, who for years had fought and trained with al-Qa'eda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, had long been targeting Christians, Shia Muslims and other minority religious groups in Pakistan.

They provided the fleeing al-Qa'eda - many of whom were Arabs - with safe houses, communications and exit strategies and papers if they wanted to return to the Middle East.

Those militants who remained organised traditional al-Qa'eda hits against traditional targets such as the suicide attack in Karachi in May that killed 11 French engineers.

But al-Qa'eda also helped and perhaps even encouraged local groups to step up their own agendas of attacks - thus the spate of recent attacks on Pakistani Christians.

American security officials now say there was an attempt to attack the US embassy in Jakarta on the anniversary of September 11. That failure by al-Qa'eda may have prompted local militant groups to go for an easier strike against a more traditional enemy - Australians at a nightclub in Bali.

It is clear that some of al-Qa'eda's leaders are hiding in Pakistan, including Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, a Pakistani born in Kuwait who is believed to be directing some of al-Qa'eda's worldwide operations. There is

every chance that Osama bin Laden or one of his sons may also be in Pakistan or on the country's border with Afghanistan.

The presence of such leaders takes foot soldiers to new heights of bravado and it could well be implied from the Bali bombing that some al-Qa'eda chiefs are ensconced in Indonesia.

Just as extremists transform themselves so the war against terrorism has to be constantly transforming itself.

An attack on Iraq risks making life even more difficult for Muslim regimes around the world with the threat of their people taking to the streets in anti-Western demonstrations; and it may provide more recruits for local extremist groups and make the task of counter-terrorism and intelligence gathering much more difficult.

There has been little of the nation building in countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan or the Central Asian Republics that the West had promised.

Nation building includes not just providing economic aid, but concentrating international political effort on dictatorial leaders to open up their economies and political systems.

There will be many more Balis to come unless the world gets back to the business of beating terrorism, by first catching the terrorists and then helping governments in the Muslim world to improve their performance and commitment to their own people.

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