

How a battered al-Qaeda was rebuilt

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By Ahmed Rashid in Lahore

Osama bin Laden could not have imagined as he fled the battlefield in Tora Bora in 2001 that he would have lived to see his 50th birthday.

But he has done that and more - restructuring al-Qaeda despite its losses, creating new base areas in Africa and Iraq, expanding into Europe, drawing in thousands of new recruits around the world, reviving the Taliban movement in Afghanistan and turning Pakistan into Terrorism Central.

Jonathan Evans, the newly appointed director-general of MI5 and an expert on al-Qaeda, will have a tough time tracking him down.

Last month, US intelligence officials revealed that bin Laden had wanted to die fighting in Tora Bora but they forced him to flee into Pakistan's mountainous tribal areas.

From here he and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, have reshaped al-Qaeda. Although bin Laden takes part in strategic decision making, day-to-day running of the movement is in the hands of Zawahiri, the Egyptian doctor who has placed fellow countrymen in many of the key leadership positions.

Before the September 11 attacks, senior posts in al-Qaeda were largely staffed by Saudis and Yemenis. There have been rumors of tensions among the Arabs, but bin Laden has always been weak on organization and is reported to have accepted Zawahiri's major contribution in al-Qaeda's revival.

While bin Laden remains the spiritual and military inspiration, Zawahiri has fashioned a core group of around 100 Arab trainers - experts in explosives, finances, communications, military training, urban warfare and propaganda.

At least two of London's July 7 bombers were trained in explosives, while the Taliban have been helped in fundraising and logistics. Zawahiri, a believer in suicide bombings and attacks on soft targets, has injected these tactics into places like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq where they were not part of tradition or culture. Afghanistan saw 139 suicide bombings in 2006 compared with 27 in 2005.

What unites and inspires the militants remains the global jihad ideology of the original al-Qaeda. Rather than talk about day-to-day events as Zawahiri does, bin Laden expounds on global jihad - toppling corrupt Muslim rulers, uniting the Muslim world under one leader, spreading Islam and taking on the West. Bin Laden has survived half a century due to the failed policies of the United States which declined to chase him down when it was much easier to do so and instead focused on invading Iraq.

If he were to die tomorrow, his message and organization would remain a major threat to the world.