Don't think al-Qaeda is on the back foot, it will be on the march in 2007

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By Ahmed Rashid

Every dismissive assumption made about al-Qaeda before September 11 was wrong. So is the assumption that it is in any way receding today: it is still the most dangerous international security threat to both the Western and Islamic worlds.

Osama bin Laden has not been driven underground or lost touch with his followers. Al-Qaeda is using the internet extensively to communicate with its supporters and to further its aim of creating new bases from which to organise terrorist attacks.

Suggestions that it may have morphed into some kind of "ideological" or "inspirational" organisation that merely encourages copycat groups of young Muslims to emulate its greatest "achievements", are contradicted by its leadership's steady stream of instructions to followers.

The group's second-in-command, the Egyptian doctor Ayman al-Zawahiri, put out 15 major speeches last year on audio or videotape. He dealt in detail with how al-Qaeda should prepare to take power in Iraq after the US has left, fight in Somalia and mount new attacks in Europe. This is not someone who has lost touch with his base.

In 2007, al-Qaeda will continue to develop its original aims of trying to defeat the West, carry out regime change in the Muslim world and increase its armies of supporters worldwide, to hasten the advent of its dream of a worldwide caliphate – Muslim state – ruled by al-Qaeda.

It has become a major threat to both Afghanistan and Pakistan once again, but also has a powerful presence in Iraq, Somalia, Saudi Arabia and Sudan – not to mention its cells on the European mainland.

Its main task is to train, organise and motivate armies of terrorists and fighters to capture and hold territory. In Iraq it started from scratch after the 2003 US-led invasion and now attracts volunteers from around the world to become suicide bombers. Iraq has become both a training ground and a recruitment poster.

In Afghanistan the Taliban and al-Qaeda had to flee to Pakistan after September 11, 2001. Now the Taliban are back, able to mobilise 8,000 soldiers, in a resurgence overseen by fewer than 100 hardcore Arab al-Qaeda militants, according to US and British intelligence.

This core has rebuilt a global network, capable of training British and French Muslims and of sending trainees to hone their skills in Iraq.

The Taliban are turning Pakistan's border provinces into logistic and training hubs for al-Qaeda.

Pakistan's president Pervez Musharraf long ago gave up chasing down bin Laden, while his intelligence services allow the Taliban to raise money, buy arms and recruit fighters. The bomb attack by British Muslims on the London Underground in July 2005 and the airports alarm this year had their origins in Pakistan.

MI5's director general, Eliza Manningham-Buller, says that of the 1,600 militants and 200 networks it is monitoring, a "substantial" number have connections to Pakistan.

But the most carefully nurtured al-Qaeda cells are in Europe. Al-Qaeda knows that one blast in Paris or London is worth 10 in Riyadh or Delhi. The aim is to recruit estranged Muslim youth, the product of three decades of failed integrationist policies by European governments.

If any single individual is responsible for the continuing expansion of al-Qaeda, it is President Bush. America's failed policies in the Middle East and Afghanistan, its failure to rebuild either Iraq or Afghanistan after invading them, and its support for Israel's roles in Lebanon and in the Palestinian territories, have created unprecedented anger in the Muslim world.

In Somalia America is compounding its disastrous support for the warlords by backing Ethiopia in driving out of Mogadishu the Islamists who took over.

Today, the danger of a civilisational war – between Shia and Sunni within the Islamic world, and between the West and the Islamic world – grows ever closer.