

INTERNATIONAL
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Iraq has become new epicenter for 'holy war,' ex-chief of MI6 says.

The Associated Press

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LONDON: Al-Qaida is changing its tactics and so should governments, the former head of Britain's spy agency said Tuesday, warning that the group's cells were making new inroads in Europe, Algeria, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories.

"We need to think rather carefully about where we go now — from where we are now — in confronting the consequences of 9-11," said Richard Dearlove, the former head of Britain's intelligence agency, MI6, addressing a London business conference on terrorist threats.

Dearlove was one of the purported characters in the so-called "Downing St. Memos," notes of a secret meeting in the summer of 2002 when British intelligence officials allegedly warned Prime Minister Tony Blair and his advisers that the United States was bent on going to war in Iraq despite weak evidence that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction.

U.S. tactics used after the Sept. 11 terror attacks were understandable but needed to be updated, Dearlove said, noting that Britain had taken a more "mature approach" to the U. S.-led "war on terror."

"I think if we take a longer-term view, which we should be taking now, the policy has to change," Dearlove said.

A clear moral position was needed to halt al-Qaida recruitment but Muslim leaders needed to be involved.

He also said counter-terrorist policies adopted by the United States, such as extraordinary rendition and detention without warrant, must be changed.

"At the moment there is no question that it is very easy for al Qaida to recruit its foot soldiers," he said.

"I am sure that the most efficient way for Muslim communities to police the al-Qaida influence in the U.K. is to do it themselves. My understanding is that the policy of community policing generally in the U.K. has actually failed in this specific area."

Part of the challenge was building strong alliances with foreign governments, such as Pakistan, Dearlove said.

"Some of these relationships are very fragile and require constant attention and supervision," he said.

Rohan Gunaratna, an al-Qaida expert and head of the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research in Singapore, said Iraq was becoming a "Disneyland" for al-Qaida, much like Afghanistan had been.

When the United States went to war in 2003, the al-Qaida terror network had fairly weak links in Iraq.

Iraq is now dotted by dozens of al-Qaida-affiliated groups. Some are led by Abu Ayyub al-Masri, who replaced Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in the al-Qaida chain of command and has been trying to build a support base in Europe, Gunaratna said.

"The epicenter has shifted from Afghanistan to Iraq," Gunaratna said, warning that if U.S.-led coalition forces pulled out of Iraq now, attacks in Europe would increase and troops would have to go back in two to three years.

Although much has been learned about terrorist tactics, the nature of cells and halting attacks, al-Qaida is thriving despite significant setbacks, Dearlove said.

He said al-Qaida has been successful in "brand appeal." The question now was where the brand goes next.

"Al-Qaida in Iraq seeks a propaganda victory against the West," Dearlove said of a campaign he said was meant to target U.S. and British voters, comparing it to the Vietnam war.

Al-Qaida was making new inroads in Algeria, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, and there had been a resurgence in places such as Somalia, Dearlove said. Tactics in Saudi Arabia and Indonesia have been successful in weakening terror groups.

Changes in policies needed to be "subtle and thoughtful," he said.

"Our strategy — strategic position — in sum is weak ... A strategic rethink is probably the point that we have now reached," Dearlove said.

Dearlove is now the head of Pembroke College, Cambridge University.

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