



Spain no safer from jihadist attack than before Iraq pullout - analyst

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Spain is as much a potential target of jihadist attack as it was before Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero ordered its troops out of Iraq, according to Singapore-based terror analyst Rohan Gunaratna. Speaking in an interview with a Madrid daily, he encouraged Spain to join the countries that gather terror-related intelligence there. He also questioned US President Barack Obama's commitment to a speedy withdrawal from Iraq and urged the West to add "educating the Muslim communities" to its anti-Al-Qa'idah strategy. The following is the text of the interview with Gunaratna published by the Spanish newspaper ABC website, on 8 March; first paragraph is ABC introduction:

Singapore: Rohan Gunaratna is a pioneer in the study of Al-Qa'idah and the global jihadist movement. Today, he acts a consultant on terrorism for governments and different Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). He also directs the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at Singapore's [Nanyang] Technological University, where he receives ABC.

[ABC] What threat does Al-Qa'idah pose today?

[Rohan Gunaratna] Al-Qa'idah maintains a certain operational capacity, but what it mainly does is train and assist other groups, such as the Taleban who blew up the Marriot hotel in Islamabad. Al-Qa'idah has turned into an idea above all, a visionary and training organization, and these groups with no prior experience become its extremities. However, in addition, it has increased its capacity to influence individuals all over the world and these jihadists, as in the case of the attacks in Madrid [March 2004] or Casablanca [May 2003], act tied to Al-Qa'idah above all ideologically, not operationally.

[ABC] Why don't they find Usamah Bin-Ladin, in spite of all the resources invested?

[Gunaratna] Because they are looking in the wrong place. He is not Iraq or in Afghanistan, he is in Pakistan. Bin-Ladin is smart; he knows that what the United States does best is track technology, so he doesn't use anything electronic. That means that the West must have more human resources and to do so it has to work more closely with the Pakistanis.

[ABC] Afghanistan was the major sanctuary of Al-Qa'idah until the US intervention. Does anything like that exist today in another part of the planet?

[Gunaratna] The Afghanistan of the 1990s replaced the Biq'a Valley in Lebanon as the epicentre of the world's terrorist camps, but they have dispersed. Today, we have training camps in the southern Philippines, Indonesia, Pakistan and in some places in Iraq, Somalia and in Yemen. What's more, the training is done inside houses or underground, safe from the spy satellites.

[ABC] What can be done against the global jihadist movement?

[Gunaratna] I was in Saudi Arabia recently and I can tell you that Al-Qa'idah is quite unpopular there, as in the majority of the Islamic countries. This is because they have started attacking other Muslims. That is why the West's strategy must include educating the Muslim communities, pointing out that Al-Qa'idah preaches a heretical version of Islam, and that the majority of the Muslims involved in these attacks are motivated by person and political factors, not by religion.

[ABC] Is the response from the Barack Obama Administration the appropriate one?

[Gunaratna] President Obama is like a film star, with great charisma, who speaks to the heart of Muslims. It's not that George W. Bush was against Islam, but he was a very poor communicator and he did not take Muslim public opinion into account, something which Barack Obama does do. However, he also needs to understand that the threat is very real and that withdrawing the troops from Iraq in such a short space of time might create fresh problems.

[ABC] Is Spain safer with Prime Minister [Jose Luis Rodriguez] Zapatero than it was with [former premier Jose Maria] Aznar?

[Gunaratna] Absolutely not. Intervening in Iraq was a mistake, but once there Spain should not have withdrawn. Spaniards believe they are safer now with Zapatero, but they are no safer than they were with Aznar. I believe that Spain needs to form part of the club of countries that gather information in Iraq. The terrorists who train there can attack on Spanish soil in the future.

[ABC] In your book "Inside Al-Qa'idah", you say that Usamah Bin-Ladin tried to create a Suni-Shi'i jihadist alliance. Do you still believe this information to be correct?

[Gunaratna] While Bin-Ladin was living in Khartoum, the Iranian intelligence services supported Al-Qa'idah and other groups that operated in Sudan and members of Al-Qa'idah received training in Iran and Lebanon. However, the anti-Shi'i attacks by Al-Zarqawi in Iraq and by the Taleban in Afghanistan destroyed the Suni-Shi'i collaboration. However, if Iran is attacked, it is highly likely that these Shi'i groups will side with Al-Qa'idah again.

[ABC] Often, the terrorists of yesterday are the political leaders of today. Is something like that conceivable with Al-Qa'idah?

[Gunaratna] With some leaders perhaps, but not with all of them. Bin-Ladin will never be a respectable leader; he has brutally killed too many people. He is not a Nelson Mandela.

Source: ABC website, Madrid, in Spanish 8 Mar 10