Al Qaeda's renewed focus on inflicting terrorist atrocities on British soil reflects a pervasive weakness in their strategy as their legitimating logic threatens to unravel

Until recently, Al Qaeda has been on the back foot, largely through its own blunders in the non-Western world. Yet during the Christmas period, Prime Minister David Cameron put Britain on a high 'terror-alert' after nine British men of Bangladeshi origin were arrested for allegedly plotting terrorist attacks on shopping malls and nightclubs in London, a case that is still to be resolved. **Alia Brahimi** *argues that Al Qaeda's activity in targeting Britain and Europe is unlikely to let up, because it sees attacks on 'legitimate' targets in the West as bolstering its flagging perceived legitimacy and authority, and as congruent with its more 'moderate' tactics in the Arabian peninsula of minimizing harm to Muslims.*

Britain, Europe and the US can expect an increase in attempts by al-Qaeda to attack their interests. However, these efforts should be understood as part of al-Qaeda's pervasive weakness rather than its strength. Al-Qaeda's leaders, particularly in Yemen, know that it is imperative that they keep trying to hit western targets in order pull the *jihad* away from the brink. The recent terror attack at Moscow airport also highlights how large targets in the West are still vulnerable to attack by determined suicide bombers.

Despite the open goal handed to bin Laden by the US-lead coalition's invasion of Iraq from 2003-8, and the increased relevance and resonance of his anti-imperial rhetoric in this period, Al Qaeda failed in its main efforts. The credibility of bin Laden's claim to be acting in defence of Muslims has exploded alongside the scores of suicide bombers dispatched to civilian centres with the direct intention of massacring swathes of (Muslim) innocents.

Moreover, where al-Qaeda in Iraq gained control over territory, as in the Diyala and Anbar provinces, the quality of life offered to the Iraqi people was a source of further alienation. Music, smoking and shaving were banned, women were forced to take the veil, and the punishments for disobedience included rape, the chopping off of hands and the beheading of children.

In the end, bin Laden's ideology, which relied first and foremost on a (poetic) narrative of victimhood, became impossible to sustain. Bin Laden's project is profoundly moral. He casts himself as the defender of basic freedoms. He eloquently portrays his *jihad* as entirely defensive and al-Qaeda as the vanguard group acting in defence of the *umma*. He maintains that all the conditions for a just war have been met.

In reality, however, all of his just war arguments – about just cause, right authority, last resort, necessity, the legitimacy of targeting civilians – are based on one fundamental assumption: that al-Qaeda is defending Muslims from non-Muslim aggressors. Hence it is essential that (1) al-Qaeda stops killing Muslims and (2) al-Qaeda starts hitting western targets and the regimes which enable the alleged western encroachment.

The emergence of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in January 2009 can be

viewed as part of this goal (much as the al-Qaeda-affiliated GSPC in Algeria formed in opposition to the moral bankruptcy of the GIA). Their publications favour targeted violence such as political assassinations and attacks within US military barracks, such as that perpetrated by Major Nidal Hasan at Fort Hood.

Their most high-profile operations have been assaults on the US and British embassies in Sana'a, an attempt to assassinate the Saudi security chief Mohammed bin Nayef, the bid by the 'underpants bomber' (a former University College London student) to blow up a flight from Amsterdam to Detroit, and the plot to explode cargo planes over western cities. The latest issue of their English-language magazine is dedicated to providing guidance in, and theological justifications for, attacks in the heart of the west. Certainly, American-born cleric Anwar al-Awlaki's star is rapidly ascending, precisely because of his fluency in English and his appeal among Muslims outside the region.

In Yemen, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) have internalised lessons from Iraq and are seeking to keep the population and the tribes on side. Their statements articulate the political and social discontent of the populace. The leadership seems to subscribe to bin Laden's argument that violence must be used strategically and not wantonly. AQAP militants recently captured Yemeni soldiers fighting on the side of the government and, instead of beheading the prisoners, they set them free.

The *jihad* taking root in Yemen is more hopeful for bin Laden than in other outposts. In North Africa, 'al-Qaeda' exists principally as an Algerian phenomenon focused primarily on the battle with the Algerian state. The 'al-Qaeda' elements which remain in Iraq and Pakistan have hitched their wagon to an especially virulent and puritanical ideology, which focuses on slaughtering the Shia and any souls they deem insufficiently 'Muslim'. Across the border in Afghanistan, and owing to their notoriously brutal and divisive tactics like indiscriminate suicide bombs and beheadings, al-Qaeda is no longer welcomed with open arms. Much of this extremism bin Laden himself has spoken out against.

AQAP represents a fresh chance for al-Qaeda. But bin Laden understands that al-Qaeda have much ground to make up in the battle of ideas. Al-Qaeda have been forced on to the back foot, mainly by their own failings. It is in this context of strategic failure that we should view their increasing calls and ramped-up efforts to hit more 'legitimate' targets in Britain and the West.

Alia Brahimi will be speaking at the LSE Public Lecture, America's Wars in the Muslim World on Wednesday 26 January, to promote her new book Jihad and Just War in the War on Terror. *Click* here *for more details.*