It will be dangerous to ignore the man in the turban
By Frank Gardner

So, the fervent strategist and spokesman of al-Qaeda was back on our screens last week. Dr Ayman al-Zawahiri promised Britain more death and destruction, and did his best to make life uncomfortable for the Prime Minister on the eve of his summer holidays. Let us leave aside for now the important question of whether or not he and his organisation really did have any operational role in last month's London bombings.

The issue that is becoming increasingly urgent is whether or not al-Qaeda - and those who follow its vengeful creed - have any sort of negotiable aims. On the surface of it there are plenty of grounds for thinking they don't. The last al-Qaeda militant I met gave me a big smile, said "Peace be upon you," then took out a pistol and shot me, leaving me for dead on the streets of Riyadh. But he was hardly a decision-maker. The question now is could or should the West come to an understanding with al-Qaeda ideologues in order to prevent further attacks, or would this simply be seen as surrender and an invitation to further violence?

Osama bin Laden offered Europe a truce last year, giving its governments three months to get out of Iraq and Afghanistan. The offer was ignored, but although the idea that you cannot and should not make deals with terrorists is a noble one, it is not always followed in practice. Witness the IRA. There are arguments both for and against trying to negotiate with al-Qaeda, but what Western leaders have largely failed to do until now is to take the trouble to really understand what on earth it is that al-Qaeda actually wants.

"They don't like us because they don't like our way of life," said President Bush about al-Qaeda on more than one occasion. That is missing the point; al-Qaeda's leadership has never given a stuff how Americans behave in their own country. What they object to most is the presence of Western forces in Muslim lands. It is true that one of the organisation's early ideological influences was an Egyptian engineer who returned from the US bitter and disgusted at what he saw there as decadent behaviour. But that is not the reason why bin Laden and those who follow him are at war with the West. The US Administration has also sought to depict al-Qaeda as nihilistic madmen with no discernible aims. Again, this is untrue. Al-Qaeda and those that follow it do have aims and grievances but they also have a maddening habit of shifting the goalposts.

In the 15 years that I have been watching the al-Qaeda phenomenon I have seen its agenda morph from being a localised, country-specific one into a global war with America and all its allies. Al-Qaeda as an organisation began as a way of administering the thousands of young Arab volunteers who had flocked to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets and then their Afghan communist allies. By the early 1990s bin Laden had turned his attentions towards his own country, Saudi Arabia, whose rulers he fiercely criticised for allowing in US troops. In backstreet bookshops in old Jeddah I would come across scratchy cassette tapes circulating illegally that shared his view. They carried sermons railing against the continued presence of these troops and against the Saudi government for keeping them there. By 1996 bin Laden had decided that America was the root of all problems for Muslims worldwide and that year he publicly declared war on Americans. But even then it was still safe for a Western journalist to visit him in his Afghan exile and several did. In fact we narrowly missed getting the first television interview with him because of the Taliban advance on Kabul. "Tell the BBC to wait until things settle down," he told his PR officer in London, a Saudi dissident now awaiting extradition to the US.

Yet over the next two years bin Laden became increasingly radicalised by the man in the turban we saw last Thursday. Dr Ayman al-Zawahiri had headed his own terrorist organisation, Egyptian Islamic Jihad, but after joining forces with bin Laden they issued their joint "declaration of jihad against Jews and crusaders" (ie Christians). Their beef was essentially that America should stop supporting Israel and what they saw as corrupt and apostate regimes in the Arab world.

When I interviewed Osama bin Laden's half-brother Yeslam this summer, he told me how al-Zawahiri's violent, global views on jihad and revenge were largely responsible for shaping Osama's own views on the direction al-Qaeda should take. In short, he got him to think big. Instead of limiting himself to condemning the presence of US troops in Saudi Arabia, bin Laden and his senior commanders now sanctioned attacks on US embassies in east Africa, a billion dollar US warship in Yemen, and of course on New York and Washington. With the destruction of al-Qaeda's Afghan bases in 2001 it has become much harder to ascertain if there is any central direction behind the violence attributed to them. Last year's Madrid bombings, for example, appear to have been carried out by north African extremists with no operational ties to the rump al-Qaeda leadership in Pakistan.

If so, it could be argued, then what is the point in paying any attention to the latest rant from a man whose sole message seems to be one of violence? But to ignore al-Zawahiri all together would be dangerous. Even if it were true that he and his associates no longer control terrorist operations, his ideology inspires many, providing sanction to young jihadis who see in his words a reassurance that they have a secret duty to somehow hit back at the West for its actions in Muslim countries.

The Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary have rightly pointed out in recent days that al-Qaeda was attacking the West long before the invasions of either Iraq or Afghanistan. But it would be wrong to assume that al-Qaeda's attacks simply came out of nowhere. They stem from a desire both for revenge for perceived injustices and to warn off the West from "interfering" in Muslim countries.

The question of whether the West should talk to al-Qaeda is really an academic one. These people do not sit around long tables with bottles of Evian and interpreters. But they have, through smuggled video cassettes and internet broadcasts, and in their own pedantic and lecturing way, made their demands clear. These are: the withdrawal of all Western forces from Muslim lands, especially Iraq, the withdrawal of support for Israel, and of support for "apostate" governments, specifically in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. I am not for one minute suggesting that the West must do al-Qaeda's bidding, but it is easy to see how the first of these demands currently carries most weight amongst al-Qaeda's followers.

It is true that there are men at the heart of al-Qaeda who still dream of reviving by force the great mediaeval caliphate, an Islamic empire that once stretched from Andalusia to India. These individuals will probably never be satisfied until the whole world is one giant caliphate but their ideas have little popular appeal on the Muslim street. There are also the smouldering conflicts in Kashmir and Chechnya but these are hard to blame on the West. By contrast, the invasion of Iraq and - to a lesser extent - the denial of a viable Palestinian homeland are two burning, emotive issues for many, many Muslims. If these can be resolved then the extremist ideologues risk being left as rebels without a cause. If they are left to fester then al-Qaeda and its associations will never be short of recruits.

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