

Terrorism in 2004

By Mike Dunn

Two years after the 'war on terror' commenced the parameters are taking shape. The early assessment that the war would last for decades because of the geo-political context; the challenges of keeping public opinion onside; the ability of terrorists to exploit the fault lines of international opinion and the painstaking forensic skills required to arrest and prosecute alleged terrorists, is now being reassessed against the background of successful security operations. And although terrorists are exploiting states such as Afghanistan, Columbia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Lebanon, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Somalia and Iraq as havens from which to initiate operations, US foreign policy initiatives, the 'war on terror' and the slow but steady moves towards Iraqi independence are beginning to undermine Muslim support for al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah. Continuing foreign policy pressure from the US and attacks by al Qaeda against Muslim targets in Saudi Arabia have caused dictatorial regimes such as Saudi Arabia to begin to rethink their approach to democratic reform.

The strategic intent behind al Qaeda attacks on 11 September 2001 is now being countered more effectively by the US and its allies. The al Qaeda attacks in Saudi Arabia over the past three months and the series of attacks by Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia are beginning to work against the terrorist aim of gaining widespread Muslim support for their *jihād*. As well, al Qaeda's apparent decision to concentrate its efforts against US and coalition forces in Iraq to defeat the US and to undermine the potential for a democratic Iraq is looking futile against US determination to stay and succeed. The intense but mostly low level fighting in Iraq is providing an opportunity for the US and its coalition partners to target increasing numbers of terrorists in Iraq even though significant numbers of soldiers are being killed in the process.

The security operations conducted since the September 11 attacks have reduced the capacity of al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah to plan and undertake attacks on a broad scale. Softer targets have been selected throughout the past 12 months as US and other coalition partners are better protected. The inability to undertake subsequent attacks in the US, or to initiate attacks in the UK or Australia, despite rhetoric to the contrary, are strong indications of organizations under significant stress from successful counter operations.

Al Qaeda and the other terrorist groups in Iraq have achieved one significant strategic success. Targeted attacks against United Nations organizations and staff members have reinforced the determination by some members of the Security Council to prevent the UN from undertaking a major role in the democratisation and reconstruction of Iraq. Continued division between France, Germany and Russia, and the US and Great Britain over Iraq, will be essential if the aims of al Qaeda are to be achieved in the Middle East.

Terrorist intent in 2004

Al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah face two significant challenges in 2004. The first is to avoid another year in which much of their leadership team continues to be captured or

killed. The loss of capacity to plan and execute attacks has been evident with the capture or killing of key operations personnel within both groups. This lack of capacity when combined with an increasing lack of funds and an inability to travel to preferred symbolic target locations has been a powerful indication of decline within earlier terrorist groups in the past. This scenario will be increasingly difficult to avoid as the 'war on terror' campaign gains further impetus and terrorist attacks are progressively constrained into areas in South and Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Another year like the last will see the back of al Qaeda operations broken and a significant drop in the level of Muslim support. Jemaah Islamiyah is under as much pressure as al Qaeda but its support in Southeast Asia is significant, extensive, and based on a broader range of specific regional resentments that will take longer to erode.

The second challenge is to stop a democratic solution being achieved in Iraq. Such a template in the Middle East would provide a powerful impetus to the current roadmap for peace between Palestine and Israel, and play a significant role in undermining continued support for states such as Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and perhaps even Syria, for the current regime of terror attacks against Israeli citizens and settlements. And while al Qaeda is only suspected of being involved in the current attacks on US and coalition forces, it is highly likely that they are involved and that they will reinforce their level of effort over the coming months to undermine the US foreign policy objective in Iraq.

Perceptions of US foreign policy initiatives in the Middle East do appear to be one of the major impediments to a successful implementation of the roadmap in Palestine. The foreign policy address by President Bush on 6 November gave a new perspective of the efficacy of a number of US foreign policy initiatives in the Middle East over the past 60 years. He particularly criticised past administrations – Democrats and Republicans – for accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East. The address while criticised in a number of Middle Eastern states did receive considerable praise as well. And while many will hold their judgement until they see the rhetoric being followed with actions, the combination of this speech and its implications, and a determined effort to make a democratic Iraq an example to Iran and Syria, and to allies such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, will begin to grow US foreign policy credibility during the coming year.

Terrorism in the region

Southeast Asia and Australia are likely to be the location for more complex and lethal terrorist attacks in the coming year. But given the increasing effectiveness of the US and its allies in conducting the 'war on terror' and constraining the actions of al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah, both groups are likely to lash out against 'soft' targets throughout Southeast Asia. As US, UK and Australian embassies and consulates become more difficult to target the terrorist focus will continue to shift to businesses, hotels, bars, tourist destinations, and transportation means. And nationals from countries involved in the 'war on terror' will likely face an increased level of threat throughout the region. Australia is also likely to face an increased level of threat from terrorist attack during the coming year. The improved security measures being implemented throughout the US are reducing the opportunity for external terrorist operational cells to enter the US and carry their attack into the US heartland; still the al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah preferred

target. And while the potential for determined terrorist cells to succeed in entering and attacking the US should not be discounted, the improved security will mean that allies such as Australia will receive a higher priority when planning future attacks. Indeed, there has been a steady flow of evidence over the past year that indicates Australia is already high on the target lists of both al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah. As governments throughout Australia continue to strengthen security defences around icons, critical infrastructure, and other institutions, terrorists will plan to attack softer, more open targets where large numbers of the public and visitors to Australia congregate.

The modus operandi for attacks during the coming year is likely to make use of improvised explosive devices and suicide bombers. Large bombs concealed in vehicles and delivered to targets by suicide bombers have been widely used to date and have caused significant casualties. Any terrorist attack within Australia will be judged a success by al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah. And given Australia's close proximity to a number of failing or failed states which potentially provide short term safe havens and bases for terrorist cells, entry into and attacks against targets in close proximity to these states should not be discounted.

Where to from here?

The next 12 months will be the most important in the 'war on terror'. During that period the US and its allies will continue to achieve significant successes against both terrorist groups. Understanding the importance of the next 12 months to their *jihad* al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah will take significant risks to carry the attack to symbolic targets in the US, UK and Australia in the first instance, and then to other US allies in the war.

Continued success in the coming months is not assured but the security and intelligence initiatives being implemented and continually improved by the allies point to a positive environment in which the 'war on terror' will be prosecuted. Churchill said it best when he said, "we are not at the end, we are not even at the beginning of the end, but we are at the end of the beginning". The winning of this 'war on terror' looks more do-able today than it did 12 months ago.