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# IDSS COMMENTARIES

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## INTERVIEW WITH ROHAN GUNARATNA<sup>1</sup>

3 September 2002

Interviewed by Stephanie Walker and Sean Costigan  
Editor, *Columbia International Affairs Online*

*SW: To what extent has the intervention in Afghanistan managed to disrupt Al Qaeda's financial networks, training and communications capabilities?*

RG: It has primarily affected the training infrastructure. Training operations have been dismantled and destroyed. Their financial capabilities are operational only outside of Afghanistan.

*SC: Can you describe the training that potential Al Qaeda recruits receive? How do the training camps work as part of Al Qaeda's overall strategy and is the training significantly different from that of other terrorist groups?*

RG: Al Qaeda training functioned together with the Taliban to provide training. One hundred ten thousand recruits were trained during the past ten years. Only three thousand were invited to join Al Qaeda. Most of the others joined other Islamist groups including the Chechnyan Mujahidin, GIA in Algeria, Abu Sayyaf Group in the Philippines, Jemaah Islamiyyah of Indonesia.

*SC: So is it significantly different from other terrorist groups?*

RG: Osama bin Laden functions in three ways. Inspiration, instigation, and direct support. Inspiration in his recruiting of territorial migrants. Instigation, instigating Islamists to strike Western targets. And finally direct support. He provides direct support by increasing capacity and capability, and by providing training and technical assistance. By opening a number of training camps and sending trainers to Chechnya, Algeria, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

*SC: You describe Al Qaeda as being the first multinational terrorist group. What does this mean for counterterrorist strategy?*

RG: The contemporary wave of terrorism began in 1968. All the groups up until that time had been mononationalist. Al Qaeda recruits from 40 nationalities in 74 different

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Rohan Gunaratna is an acknowledged expert on terrorism. He has just published a book *Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (Columbia University Press, June 2002). Dr. Gunaratna will be joining IDSS after having worked as a research fellow at the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, University of St. Andrews, Scotland. Previously, he was principal investigator for the United Nations' Terrorism Prevention Branch, and had served as a consultant on terrorism to several governments and corporations. He has been a visiting scholar at the University of Illinois, the University of Maryland, and the University of Notre Dame, and has lectured widely in Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia on terrorism and countermeasures. He is honorary fellow at the International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism in Israel. He is the author of seven books on armed conflict.

countries, and hence has developed a global reach and could operate in any country. We must have a multinational coalition. The current multinational coalition started seriously fighting against them only after 9/11. Al Qaeda has a head start of ten years, so the fight has just begun.

For a Western intelligence agency to penetrate an Islamist organization is very difficult. Although a determined intelligence organization can infiltrate an Islamist organization. Take the example of Hezbollah. After the marine barracks bombing in 1983 it took five years to infiltrate Hezbollah. The U.S. should infiltrate by recruiting members already in Al Qaeda or by finding those who would join and the U.S. should run them as agents. You cannot develop them in the short term.

*SC: So within one to two years?*

RG: Within a one to two year period we could begin the process of infiltrating. You have to get to know their mindset and *modus operandi*. If you do not infiltrate, you will simply know their strategy but not what they are planning. You can't protect ten thousand targets. Without human intelligence information, you will not know what they are planning. Without infiltration, it is impossible to develop the quality needed to disrupt them in the planning and preparation phase.

*SC: How likely do you think more attacks are to occur in the United States? How about in Europe and the Middle East? Are Middle Eastern leaders potential targets?*

RG: We must look at the post-9/11 attacks. There have been one dozen attacks, they bombed the oldest synagogue in Tunisia, killing 19, then Karachi bus bombing that killed 11 French technicians, the attempted poisoning of the U.S. embassy water supply in Rome, the attempted attack on the U.S. embassy in France, the plan to attack the U.S. military base in Sarajevo, U.S. warships in the Straits of Gibraltar and Malacca and the U.S. embassy in Singapore. They have been only partially successful. For example, the U.S. consulate bombing in Karachi injured only one Marine.

Al Qaeda will continue to mount these small to medium-sized attacks in the next one to two years. As long as the U.S. security agencies, law enforcement, and the U.S. public maintain a high state of alert, it cannot mount large scale operations. They will be able to conduct small to mid-size attacks outside the U.S.

*SW: You mentioned the destruction of training camps. How will this affect Al Qaeda in the long term?*

RG: It will lower the quality of training for future Al Qaeda members. It will affect the resources. All terrorists need a safe zone as their base area to train. The safe zone for Al Qaeda training is gone. Since August 1998, the Pakistani authorities have prevented transit from land-locked Afghanistan. Since the attacks in Kenya and Tanzania, Al Qaeda established a number of training bases in the Philippines, Indonesia, Chechnya and those will compensate for the lack of training bases in Afghanistan.

*SC: To what extent has the Saudi exportation of Wahabiism and funding of madrasas enabled Osama bin Laden?*

RG: Saudi funding of madrasas has in many ways radicalized and politicized Muslim youth who are now very vulnerable to Al Qaeda and associate groups. Saudi policy has not helped at all to contain the threat of terrorism. Three to five Al Qaeda members are captured and killed in a week. For every three to five that are killed, ten to twelve are trained. Al Qaeda is able to replenish its human losses. The Saudi export of Wahabiism has helped bring about the current Islamist milieu. Saudis must reform their education system and they must create a modern education system.

SC, SW: Thank you for your time.

RG: Thank you both.