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Author(s)	Raman, B.
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FROM BALI TO MOSCOW: LOCAL GENIUS NEEDED IN FIGHTING TERRORISM BUSHFIRES

B. Raman *

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From Bali to Moscow, in South and West Asia, bushfires of “Jihadi terrorism” have flared up across the world after Sept 11. One year after the start of the USA’s Operation Enduring Freedom, the US and the rest of the world are only dimly aware of the nature of Osama Bin Laden’s International Islamic Front and the gravity of the threat posed to millions of innocent people by the irrational dregs of the second Afghan war. The international community has yet to find an effective response to the source of religious-inspired terrorism. India, China, Russia, Central and Southeast Asia, which face problems of extremism/terrorism in their territories, have with some exceptions, uncritically accepted the US perceptions of the threat and supported the US war against terrorism. However they would be well advised to take a closer look at the nature of the threat and devise their own response to the problem as it affects them.

When the USA and UK launched their war in Afghanistan in October 2001 to destroy Al Qaeda forces and drive out the Taliban Regime, I had cautioned that it was unlikely to see the end of international terrorism fed by religious fanaticism. It would probably be the beginning of a new and more virulent form of “Punishment Terrorism” of the kind seen on Sept 11. No country having a sizeable Muslim population, and no economy, would be safe from its debilitating impact.

While many Al Qaeda forces were killed or dispersed from Afghanistan and the Taliban regime toppled by the US-backed Northern Alliance, at the end of January 2002, terrorists from different countries fled Afghanistan. The Afghan war of the 1980s against the Soviet Union’s forces spawned a crop of Afghan returnees, mainly Arabs and Pakistanis, but also Chechens and others from Central and Southeast Asia, who spread to countries in the Islamic and non-Islamic world and created havoc through acts of terrorism, which culminated in the 9-11 air attacks in the US. Now the US-led war against terrorists in Afghanistan has given birth to a new crop of Afghan returnees. And a new wave of international terrorism would come largely from them, as seen in the various attacks in India and Pakistan. The international coalition against terrorism must closely monitor and neutralize the activities of the new crop.

The survivors of the US air strikes in Afghanistan have managed to return to their countries or find new theatres for their “Jihad”. They have been hitting soft targets to show they are still alive and kicking, and their motivation remains as strong as ever. In Bali, as in

India, Pakistan, Tunisia, Yemen and Kuwait, it was the desire to punish which has been the motivating factor. It was punishment terrorism without any strategic objective. However the latest strike in Moscow was an attempt by the terrorist organization concerned to step up the struggle for the achievement of their strategic objective of an independent Chechnya.

It is therefore important to recognize that the new threat confronting the international community is not from Al Qaeda alone, but more from the constituent members of the international Islamic front, which came into being in 1998 under the leadership of Osama Bin Laden, and consists of Taliban, Al Qaeda and organizations from Pakistan, Egypt, Central Asian Republics, China (Xin Jiang) and Southern Philippines.

Members of this front helped the Taliban in its fight against the Northern Alliance before 9-11 and fought against US and British troops and NA after 9/11. A large number of terrorists from other countries, such as Southeast Asia and Chechnya, joined the international Islamic Front's Jihad. While the Filipinos fought under the banner of the Abu Sayyaf, those from the other countries of Central and Southeast Asia fought under the banner of different Pakistani organizations in Afghanistan. Likewise a number of Afro-Americans and others from US and Europe fought under the banner of the Pakistani organizations or the Taliban. None fought under the banner of Al Qaeda because Osama Bin Laden, for reasons of his personal security, did not admit non-Arabs into Al Qaeda. They were trained by Al Qaeda instructors but had to fight as members of the other constituents of the IIF, not Al Qaeda.

On their return to their countries the Afghan dregs joined indigenous terrorist organizations to give their Jihad a domestic dimension, directing their anger against their governments. The first wave of Afghan veterans started domestic Jihad in the name of Islam in Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Chechnya in the 1980's (and the 1990s). These bushfires of Afghan-inspired Jihad were put out in Egypt and Tunisia but are still burning in Algeria and Chechnya. While anger against the US and Israel is a common thread uniting all these organisations, there are also other influences arising from domestic factors.

A new aggravating factor is their anger at their governments for cooperating with the US in its war against terrorism. Religious-inspired terrorists tend to be irrational. Governments have to be careful not to add to their irrationality in the way counter-terrorism operations are conducted and projected to the public. Both the campaign and multi-national cooperation have to be more covert than overt, avoiding high profile spectacular operations and ill-advised rhetoric. US reliance on tough talking and large-scale military operations have been akin to waving the red rag at the terrorist bulls, feeding their irrationality.

In fighting these bushfires, each affected country has to take into account the local circumstances and sensitivities and avoid adopting a counter-terrorism response which may suit the US' interests but not its own. All countries facing the scourge of "Jihad terrorism" have to fight the menace according to their own genius, albeit with the help of intelligence and legal assistance from other members of the international community, including the US. But the US cannot win the war for them. They have to win it by their own wits and action.

* The author was formerly the head of the Counter-Terrorism Division of the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW), India's external intelligence agency, and now heads the Institute of Topical Studies, Chennai.