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## Iraq war has swollen ranks of al-Qaida

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War in Iraq has swollen the ranks of al-Qaida and "galvanised its will" by increasing radical passions among Muslims, an authoritative think-tank said yesterday.

The warning, echoing earlier ones by MI5 and MI6, was made in the annual report of the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance*.

It said US claims after the invasion of Iraq that al-Qaida was on the run, and that the "war on terror" had turned the corner, were "over-confident". John Chipman, the institute's director, warned that the full effect of the war might never be known, because of the chaos it had left behind.

"Whatever one may or may not find in the next six months will not be proof of what may or may not have been there ... There will always be a degree of uncertainty," he said. The report notes that, according to the US, more than 3,000 suspected al-Qaida operatives have been arrested, including the third in command, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.

But it adds: "The counter-terrorism effort has also perversely impelled an already highly decentralised and evasive transnational terrorist network to become more 'virtual' and protean and, therefore, harder to identify and neutralise. If al-Qaida has been compromised since the Afghanistan intervention from an offensive point of view, from a defensive perspective it is better off."

Al-Qaida's great advantage, the report says, is its operational flexibility as a result of it not having a state to defend. The institute believes the network is present in more than 60 countries, has a rump leadership intact, and that there are more than 18,000 potential terrorists at large, with recruitment continuing.

Al-Qaida's cells are taking measures against increasing electronic surveillance, operating semi-autonomously, but "maintaining links through field commanders to [Osama] bin Laden and his shura [council] who can activate networks and give operational orders".

The informal hawala banking system ensured a stream of unregulated cash from diaspora communities to local radical Muslim groups, as the investigation into five suicide bombings in Morocco in May demonstrated. The failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq will further increase al-Qaida's recruiting power, says the thinktank.

The network wants to develop its own capability to use weapons of mass destruction, but it probably has not yet done so. Meanwhile, it is likely to keep hitting soft targets directed at Americans, Europeans and Israelis.

The parliamentary intelligence and security committee reported last month that Tony Blair was warned by his intelligence chiefs on the eve of war that an invasion of Iraq would increase the danger of terrorist attacks.

It disclosed that in February, a month before the invasion, Whitehall's joint intelligence committee said that "al-Qaida and associated groups continued to represent by far the greatest threat to western interests, and that threat would be heightened by military action against Iraq".

Though al-Qaida's leadership remains impervious to political compromise, the report says some local affiliates and large numbers of potential recruits are not. The most pressing matter is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Attempts by al-Qaida to penetrate Hamas have so far failed, mainly because Hamas's objectives are basically local. But "Hamas/al-Qaida links could materialise if Hamas became desperate and politically marginalised", says the report.

Meanwhile a Pakistani minister has said that one of the men killed in an offensive against al-Qaida appears to have been a high-ranking member. Eight al-Qaida suspects and two Pakistani soldiers were killed in the October 2 raid, when army commandos attacked a suspected hideout in south Waziristan.

"There is a probability that a man among those killed has a reward on his head," the information minister, Sheikh Rashid Ahmed, said.

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