Al-Qaeda leader issues jihad guidelines

Ayman al-Zawahri deems Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq suitable and endorses conflicts in Russia, India and China.

The leader of al-Qaeda has issued his first specific guidelines to his followers on how to conduct a jihad, or holy war, as he spelled out the countries where the group's proxy war against the US and Israel was inevitable.

According to a report published by the SITE monitoring service on Monday, Ayman al-Zawahri said that those countries included Afganistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Somalia, but he urged restraint in attacking other Muslim sects and non-Muslims and in starting conflicts in countries where jihadis might find a safe base to promote their ideas.

In Pakistan, where intelligence sources believe Zawahri is hiding, he said fighting "aims at creating a safe haven for the mujahideen in Pakistan, which can then be used as a launching pad for the struggle of establishing an Islamic system in
Pakistan".

The SITE document provides a rare look at al-Qaeda's strategy 12 years after the September 11 attacks on the US and the nature of its global ambitions from North Africa to the Caucasus to Kashmir.

Zawahri also stressed the importance of "dawa", or missionary work, to spread its ideas.

"As far as targeting the proxies of America is concerned, it differs from place to place," he said.

"The basic principle is to avoid entering into any conflict with them, except in the countries where confronting them becomes inevitable."

New targets

Those comments are particularly relevant for North Africa, where many analysts believe al-Qaeda is using the less restrictive environment which followed the 2011 Arab uprisings to seek new followers, often through local alliances, while avoiding drawing attention to itself by eschewing attacks.

"Our struggle is a long one, and jihad is in need of safe bases," Zawahri said in his "general guidelines for jihad" posted on jihadi forums.

Al-Qaeda has a strong support network inside Pakistan. Its founder Osama bin-Laden lived there until his death in May 2011.

It also has close ties to the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, with which the Pakistan government has said it will hold peace talks.

Zawahri cited the need to weaken Algeria, which crushed fighters in a civil war during the 1990s, and spread jihadi influence throughout the Maghreb and West Africa.

And in an apparent nod to those who say al-Qaeda's focus on the US weakens their battle against governments at home, he endorsed the right of militants to fight Russians in the Caucasus, Indians in Kashmir and Chinese in Xinjiang.