

Bin Laden tapes: Fact or fiction?

Osama tapes foster pro-war rhetoric

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In the past year, Zawahri has been issuing tapes, and Bin Laden has been careful not to appear

The audiotapes of OSAMA BIN LADEN have become an important medium between AL-QAEDA network and the outside world. If authentic, these tapes could enable BIN LADEN to convey his opinions to his enemies and followers, issue threats and even claim responsibility for terror attacks carried out by his group. It is obvious that the usefulness of such tapes cannot be questioned, but how can people be sure of their origin and authenticity? Little time is dedicated to such examinations. But an analysis can really influence the way we judge similar evidence in the future.

There is no reason whatsoever to believe that these audiotapes are authentic. While they are always followed by reports of scientific voice analyses, these studies have been invariably done by CIA experts. In fact, only one occasion was an independent analysis done. And while American officials were certain of the tape's authenticity, Swedish scientists were convinced that it was fake.

Consider yesterday's audiotape, in which BIN LADEN warned that AL-QAEDA is planning new attacks against the United States, but offered a conditional "long-term truce", which the White House rejected. Hours after the tape's release, CIA officials said it is a "genuine message" from BIN LADEN. "Following a technical analysis, the voice on the tape is believed to be that of OSAMA BIN LADEN," said a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) official. On the other hand, several experts doubted the tape's authenticity. "It was like a voice from the grave", said Bruce Lawrence, a Duke professor, who analyzed more than 20 complete speeches and interviews of the AL-QAEDA chief for his recent book "Messages to the World: The Statements of OSAMA BIN LADEN."

Other officials draw a similarity between the tape and the latest U.S. missile air strike on the Afghan border that angered the Pakistanis for killing more than 18 civilians. The U.S. said that its strike was aimed at targeting BIN LADEN's deputy, AYMAN AL-ZAWAHRI. It even claimed that the attack killed top AL-QAEDA officials, though the Pakistanis insisted that only civilians were present in the hit area. "It seems that there's some relationship between this tape and the (U.S.) strike (in Pakistan), both in the content and the timing. Over more than the past year, ZAWAHRI has been the one issuing tapes, and BIN LADEN has been very careful not to appear at all, and now all of a sudden he's deviated from that," said Kenneth Katzman, Terrorism Analyst At Congressional Research Service, In-House Think Tank Of The U.S. Congress.

In several occasions, no evidence was provided to support claims of the authenticity of such tapes. The media and politicians seem little concerned about such issues. Moreover, the fact that AL-QAEDA adopted new tactics since this unverified medium emerged was never discussed. For example, the network have never claimed responsibility for any attack before the taped messages. But since their introduction, AL-QAEDA has taken responsibility for several attacks, including those against German tourists in Tunisia, Israeli tourists in Kenya, and the Madrid bombings. The group even released a taped admission of involvement in the 9/11 attacks despite all their previous pre-audiotope protestations to the contrary.

Moreover, nobody ever tried to explain why BIN LADEN focuses on the U.S.'s global interests rather than his own troubles in AFGHANISTAN. Since 9/11, it seemed that BIN LADEN preferred to target U.S. forces in IRAQ than in AFGHANISTAN. Strange also is why AL-QAEDA would use an audiotape message to threaten France, Russia and Germany, even though all three countries opposed the Bush administration's "WAR ON TERROR" to BIN LADEN's alleged new pet project, IRAQ .

Never addressed as well is the timing of the release of such audiotapes. One of the previous audiotapes was released just two days before the first anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. Its message actually preceded BUSH's first UN appeals on IRAQ by a few days, as well as similar lobbying before the U.S. Congress. Another tape emerged a year later while BUSH tried to win financial aid from Asian countries for IRAQ's reconstruction. This one also came before a donors' conference in Madrid just the following week.

Some analysts were quick to point to the perfect timing of the latest tape. They suggest that if the speaker really is BIN LADEN, then the tape will certainly boost support for BUSH. In addition to cooling down the anger provoked by the CIA's strike in Pakistan, opposition to IRAQ WAR is growing, midterm elections are coming up and international pressures are mounting on Iran over its NUCLEAR PROGRAM.

The content of such tapes is equally alarming as their timing. The push for IRAQ WAR, for example, won support when a BIN LADEN audiotape helped to cement U.S. claims of links between AL-QAEDA and SADDAM HUSSEIN. This tape was released in February 2003, while the U.S. lobbied heavily for a second UN resolution on IRAQ, and just a month before the war began.

Some analysts say that if yesterday's tape was of BIN LADEN's, then it also proves another thing; THE WAR ON TERROR didn't end terrorism and wouldn't prevent further attacks on the United States. In a CNBC interview, Vice President Dick Cheney said that the tape is a reminder that a "serious threat" to the United States remained. The audiotape would also assert the statements made by DEMOCRAT Nancy Pelosi, who said after the July bombings in London that President BUSH's "fight them there, not here" strategy plainly wasn't working.

Even after the case about the authenticity of such tapes has been made, some may still wonder if it really matters whether they are real or not. It most certainly does. While the audiotapes purportedly sent out by BIN LADEN were seldom at the forefront of the debate to launch WAR, they were key factors in creating a climate of fear in which pro-war rhetoric grew. And it is precisely for this reason that these tapes require the same level of analysis as any other piece of evidence used to convince the world about the war.

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