



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (16/2004)

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## **OPEN SEASON IN IRAQ: Osama bin Laden's New Call**

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**13 May 2004**

In an audio recording posted last Friday on Al-Qaeda's unofficial website, the Center for Research and Islamic Studies, and disseminated by the Global Islamic Media yahoo group, Osama bin Laden offered ten kilograms of gold for the heads of US administrator in Iraq Paul Bremer or his deputy; US senior military commander, Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, or his deputy; and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan or his deputy. An additional kilogram of gold was promised for slaying American and British coalition forces and civilian contractors, while half a kilogram of gold was the reward announced for Japanese and Italian military personnel and members of the Iraqi Governing Council. To date, the tape represents Al-Qaeda's most direct statement of involvement in the conflict in Iraq.

### **Audio Tape's Content**

Addressed to the Muslim nation in general and to Islamic fighters in particular, the tape is a *de facto* statement of endorsement by Bin Laden. At the start of the message, Al-Qaeda's leader congratulates the members of the Iraqi resistance for their successful one-year campaign against the US-led coalition forces in Iraq. According to Bin Laden, the resistance has tactically hampered and strategically weakened the United States and its allies, including their human losses and financial depletions.

Bin Laden also denounces the newly adopted Iraqi interim constitution, calling it an affront to Islam because it does not invoke the principles of the *Sharia*. In his view any form of government that is not based on the Islamic legal code lacks legitimacy and is an act of apostasy. Thus the Iraqi Governing Council – the representative body responsible for the document's ratification – has committed a serious breach against the religion. Its members have acted as a pliant tool in the hands of the US occupation forces, allowing them not only to take over the country's material and human resources, but also to use their experience in Iraq as a blueprint for future action.

According to Bin Laden the conflict in Iraq is yet another demonstration of America's global war on Islam. Its evolution is part and parcel of America's global scheme to "dissolve the Islamic identity in the whole of the Islamic world." Other countries and

political forms had already been co-opted into the US sphere of influence and complied readily with the US agenda. Only Islam had the strength and the constituency to oppose America by force.

Underlying Bin Laden's message is his support for the "clash of civilizations" thesis, which he has repeatedly emphasised and politically exploited, regardless of the strategic determinants and the geopolitical factors of each conflict.

However, what is new and rather ominous is his outright condemnation of the members of the Iraqi Governing Council and the appointees in any future Iraqi government as "infidels" who deserve to be killed. According to Al-Qaeda's leader, as long as they do not recognize the *Sharia* as the ultimate source of authority and do not govern in accordance with its precepts, they are transgressing the boundaries of Islam. Like the regimes in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Saddam's Iraq, they are "apostates" and constitute legitimate targets for *jihād*. Moreover, any Muslim who willingly and openly cooperates with either the US-led coalition or the Iraqi Governing Council will also be killed. As he puts it:

"In the light of the aforementioned, everyone who assists the infidels against the Muslims, such as assisting the occupying forces and their surrogates in the interim or permanent government, he will have committed an act that nullifies his Islam, and makes his blood and property violable, and his spouse would become divorced from him."

Towards the end of the tape, Bin Laden contextualised the conflict in Iraq. In Al-Qaeda's global agenda, "the land of the two rivers"(Iraq) constitutes the epicentre of *jihād* today and has replaced the symbolic significance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as the political predicament of his former homeland, Saudi Arabia.

Thus the call for armed resistance in Iraq has become an individual obligation. Whether by money, by pen, or by sword, each and every Muslim is expected to contribute. On his part, Al-Qaeda's leader – following a well-known example from Islamic history – is ready to support and spearhead the campaign by offering material incentives to the fighters. Since the US has announced a price for the capture and killing of top Al-Qaeda operatives, Bin Laden is ready to pay in gold for the assassination of key US and coalition forces leaders and UN and Iraqi officials. By extending this offer, Bin Laden is both symbolically proclaiming himself as the leader of the Iraqi resistance and giving a new impetus to the Iraqi campaign.

### **Threat or Provocation?**

Although sensationalist, Bin Laden's proposal to pay in gold for the assassination of top military and government officials in Iraq is not a new development. Fliers issued by the offices of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq and disseminated in the cities of Fallujah and

Tikrit have already offered an even higher reward on the heads of key American officials, to wit, USD 15 million. Irrespective of whether Bin Laden's gold-for-blood offer poses an actual threat or acts as a mere incitement to violence, it tracks events on the ground. What is more important to recognize, in light of Bin Laden's latest statement, is that Al-Qaeda is preparing for a phase of war beyond the transfer of power in Iraq and for a time of possible US implementation of a "democratisation" agenda in the Middle East.

### **Beyond Iraq's Transition**

By proclaiming that the Iraqi Governing Council and the future Iraqi interim government are "infidels" and worthy of killing, Bin Laden is shifting the strategic paradigm of the conflict. From a political point of view, when the United States disentangles from the day-to-day running of affairs in the country and allows for a UN-backed transitional government to assume power in June 2004, the onus of responsibility for any further developments in Iraq will fall upon Iraqis themselves. The previously quoted rationale that the insurgency is fighting an "occupation" and an "occupying force" will become defunct. In turn, the political capital that the occupation presented to the resistance camp will also dwindle.

Bin Laden now presents them with a new direction. By broadening the list of the enemies and diversifying the target menu, Al-Qaeda's leader hopes to prolong the conflict. What is at stake is not merely expelling the US-led coalition forces and denying them political credit for a successful transition in Iraq, but also dictating ultimately how the country is run and what form of government is adopted. Driving a wedge among ordinary Iraqis and their multiple ethnic, social, economic, and political allegiances is thereby of utmost importance. Citizens who might benefit from having a mantle of Iraqi sovereignty will find it impossible to extract dividends if the security situation remains unstable. In turn, the people in power will also find it difficult to implement positive change and to maintain control.

### **Struggle Over the Sharia**

On the other hand, having a clear demarcation of what the political parameters of the struggle in Iraq are will benefit Al-Qaeda's campaign in the long run. Since the United States is leaning towards a reformist agenda in the Middle East and claiming to restore political and economic freedoms to ordinary citizens, the overall direction of post-war Iraq will set a benchmark for other countries. By clearly presenting his case and emphasizing that any government that does not recognize the *Sharia* is illegitimate and should be targeted, Bin Laden is preparing the grounds for future political contestations.

Al-Qaeda's claim that political constituencies that might benefit from the US-backed reforms in the Middle East are legitimate targets of terrorism purports to create two separate political camps and to legitimize the recourse to violence on the part of Bin Laden's supporters. Such tendency to condemn ordinary Muslims as "apostates" and then to kill them is a new grist in Al-Qaeda's political mill. It effectively discards the

previously stated rationale that the organisation's struggle is driven by US policies and American presence in the Middle East. As such, the fight over popular support and political representation – rather than the fight against the United States *per se* – will characterize Al-Qaeda's campaign in the future.

Iraq will be the first test arena for this struggle. There will probably be an increase in civilian casualties and attacks against the country's infrastructure. If the US implements its agenda for democracy in the Middle East, there are likely to be similar attacks against Muslim politicians, donors, businessmen, and ordinary civilians in these countries, in addition to the western targets that terrorist networks traditionally target. The recent assassination of the Kremlin-backed Chechen president Akhmad Kadyrov is a pointer. If the Global Islamic Media group is to be believed, Afghan president Hamid Karzai and Pakistan's leader Pervez Musharraf are next on the list. And possibly some of these killings might be backed by gold too.

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