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From Absence to Presence: Understanding Bin Laden's and Al-Zarqawi's Recent Recordings

Bouchaib Silm^{*}

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In an audiotape released on May 2006, Osama bin Laden for the first time has admitted his involvement in the attacks of September 11th. This release follows the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's first ever appearance on video. Both events raise the interesting question: Why now? Although both individuals may have their own personal reasons for releasing tapes, it is highly probable their release is an attempt to shore up support for a war that is not going as well as planned.

Osama Bin Laden: From Omission to Admission

The attacks on September 11th 2001 highlighted two deep political cleavages. The first of these cleavages lies between the West and Islam while the second lies within the Muslim world. After the attacks, President Bush held Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda responsible and the reaction from most in the West was condemnation. However, reactions in the Muslim world were much more divided. First, there was a very vocal group who supported the attacks. However, although not all who were pleased with the attacks subscribed to al-Qaeda's vision, they all shared a common discontentment with US policies. A second group supported the attacks but, believing no Muslim was capable of such an act, denied there was any Muslim involvement. A third group also supported the attacks but was of the view that the attacks were orchestrated by American-Israeli collusion. Accordingly to them, the whole operation was motivated by a desire to turn world opinion against Muslims in general. By doing so, America was attempting to create an opportunity for intervention in the affairs of the Arab states. Finally, there were the majority of Muslims who rejected the attack. They, however, preferred to remain silent out of fear in the belief that if al-Qaeda was capable of such a sophisticated operation against America they were more than capable of striking out at those in the Islamic world who did not agree with them.

Osama up until the latest tape has never admitted his involvement in the attacks except for his frequent praise for individuals who executed the operation. This is in keeping with his failure to admit involvement in the East Africa Embassy bombings in August 1998 or the attack on the USS Cole in September 2000. Osama certainly profited from the confusion surrounding the attacks of September. On the one hand he could argue against the evidence provided by the Americans on his culpability while, on the other hand, he could also enjoy being responsible for the attack, at least, within those who believed in it. However, the man has decided to end the mystery.

On May 23, 2006 Osama bin Laden released an audio where, for the first time, he took responsibility for the September 11 attacks against the US. The audio was called “A Testimony to the Truth”. The recording lasted more than 4 minutes and was produced by the al-Sahab company – a company responsible for al-Qaeda’s audio-video productions. In the audio, Osama bin Laden also said that Zakaria Moussawi had no links with the attacks. Moussaoui was arrested in August 2001, a few weeks before the attacks, and is the only person convicted in America in connection with the attacks. He was recently sentenced to life in prison. Osama also declared “The truth is that he [Moussawi] has no connection whatsoever with the events of September 11”. He added “I am certain of what I say, because I was responsible for entrusting the 19 brothers with those raids”.

Al –Zarqawi: The Invisible Man

Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi has been a major figure in both Iraq and the overall al-Qaeda struggle since just before the invasion. Many believe that al-Zarqawi is an American creation used to justify the war on Iraq. They point to claims that despite losing a leg in Afghanistan he was still able to elude capture both there and in Iraq. Conspiracy theorists note that a critically injured man with a \$25 million USD reward should not be able to evade the better trained and equipped American forces. The lack of any reliable photographic evidence of al-Zarqawi only seemed to fuel his mythical standing.

In recent weeks two key questions have emerged from the shadowy jihadi world. Has al-Zarqawi separated from al-Qaeda? And has he been removed from the leadership of the jihad in Iraq? The recent communication attempts to address these questions.

The video shows a confident al-Zarqawi with an assault rifle close at hand visiting the al-Anbar province and talking to members the brigades there. Al-Zarqawi was the only one unmasked. The entire scene is reminiscent of a general visiting his troops.

The question surrounding the state of the relationship between al-Qaeda and al-Zarqawi was answered at the start of the tape. Before al-Zarqawi started his message, the video shows a photo of Osama calling upon the youth of the Ummah to support and join the Mujahideen in Iraq. This is an unequivocal statement that there is no division in al-Qaeda’s jihad. In the video, al-Zarqawi called Osama “our prince and leader” while criticizing President George Bush for not accepting the truce offered by Osama. The video also includes the voice of Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda’s number two, urging Muslims to support the Mujahideen in Iraq. Considered together, these segments of the tape are clearly an effort to dispel the idea that al-Zarqawi is isolated from or has revolted against al-Qaeda.

The second issue was not addressed as clearly. In January 2006, six militant groups including al-Zarqawi’s formed the Mujahideen Shura Council. Much to everyone’s surprise, Abdullah Arrasheed al-Baghdadi, a low profile Iraqi citizen, was appointed leader. This ignited speculation that al-Zarqawi had been replaced. It appeared that the well publicized division between the Mujahideen over strategy and tactics had been settled at the expense of its most famous leader. The disastrous operation of Amman hotels in 2005, and its ham-handed justification, crated wide spread ill will towards him. Nevertheless, this dispute was overstated. Government and allied forces tried to exploit a tactical opportunity to create an appearance of a deeper division. It is interesting that al-Zarqawi himself indirectly answered questions surrounding his current standing. He first displayed the logo of the Mujahideen Shura Council. Second, al-Zarqawi announced he is delighted with the formation of the

council, and that it will lead to the establishment of the Islamic state. He further attempted to erase all ambiguity by saying: “I am delighted to be a member of this blessed council under its blessed leadership, while I am the leader of the Qaedat al jihad in Iraq”. Thus it remains unclear why the change occurred, and what the role al- Zarqawi has in Iraq. Things are not always what they appear.

What is Ahead?

While interesting, the message of the statements raises more questions than they answer. Although it is clear al-Zarqawi is attempting to quash rumors that he has been removed from power and he is still symbolically loyal and in charge, the substantive question remains open.

The bin Laden tape is an even grater mystery. It is possible the message was simply to show that he can produce and distribute messages much faster than in the past. It was only a short time after Moussazwi’s sentence was handed down that the tape appeared. Furthermore, he could also be trying to limit the possible recruitment damage caused by Moussawi’s long sentence as al-Qaeda wants to cultivate the image of martyrs and not prisoners. The more interesting question surrounding the tape is why he has now admitted to the 9/11 attacks? The most logical answer appears to be that it is a morale boosting effort. Al-Qaeda can now officially take credit for its most successful operation at a time when it appears the war is not going well. By focusing on past success, future victories may be encouraged. In any event, both tapes are sending the same message. Al-Qaeda – be it in Afghanistan or Iraq – is confident and in command. Only time will tell if this is fact or bluster.

* Bouchaib Silm is a Research Analyst with the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University.