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Al Qaeda: Statements and Evolving Ideology

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Summary

The release of a new videotape by Osama Bin Laden in late October 2004 rekindled public debate surrounding Al Qaeda's ideology, motives, and future plans to attack the United States. The highly political tone and content of the two most recent statements released by Osama Bin Laden [April and October 2004] have led some terrorism analysts to speculate that the messages may signal a new attempt by Bin Laden to create a lasting political leadership role for himself and Al Qaeda as the vanguard of an international Islamist ideological movement. Others have argued that Al Qaeda's presently limited capabilities have inspired a temporary rhetorical shift and that the group's primary goal remains carrying out terrorist attacks against the United States and its allies around the world, with particular emphasis on targeting economic infrastructure and fomenting unrest in Iraq and Afghanistan. This report reviews Osama Bin Laden's use of public statements from the mid-1990s to the present and analyzes the evolving ideological and political content of those statements. The report will be updated periodically. For background on the Al Qaeda terrorist network, see CRS Report RS21529, *Al Qaeda after the Iraq Conflict*.

Al Qaeda's Media Campaign

Osama Bin Laden and the Al Qaeda terrorist network have conducted a sophisticated public relations and media communication campaign over the last ten years using a series of faxed statements, audio recordings, video appearances, and Internet postings.¹ Terrorism analysts believe that these messages have been designed to elicit psychological reactions and communicate complex political messages to a global audience as well as to specific populations in the Islamic world, the United States, Europe, and Asia. Bin Laden has personally stated his belief in the importance of harnessing the power of international and regional media for Al Qaeda's benefit, and Al Qaeda's central leadership structure has featured a dedicated media and communications committee tasked with issuing reports and statements in support of the group's operations. Some officials and analysts believe that Al Qaeda's messages contain signals that inform and instruct

¹ Unless indicated, all translated citations are derived from the Foreign Broadcast Information Service document, "Compilation of Usama Bin Ladin Statements 1994 - January 2004."

operatives to prepare for and carry out new attacks. Bin Laden has referred to his public statements as important primary sources for parties seeking to understand Al Qaeda's ideology and political demands.² Through his public statements over the last ten years, Bin Laden has portrayed himself both as the leader of a consistent ideological program and a strategic commander willing to tailor his violent messages and acts to specific political circumstances and audiences.

Osama Bin Laden: Statements 1994-2004

Founding Principles. Osama Bin Laden's experiences as a logistical coordinator and financier for the Afghan and Arab resistance to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan during the 1980s are thought to have provided the backdrop for his belief that Muslims could effectively defend themselves through armed struggle inspired by select Islamic principles. His exposure to the teachings of conservative Islamist scholars and militants during this period provided the theological and ideological basis for his belief in the necessity of armed resistance in the face of perceived aggression — a communally-binding Islamic principle known as “defensive jihad” — and the desirability of puritanical Salafist Islamic reform in Muslim societies.³ After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Bin Laden expressed these views in opposition to the introduction of foreign military forces to Saudi Arabia. The presence of U.S. and other non-Muslim troops in Saudi Arabia after the 1991 Gulf War inspired Bin Laden to renew his commitment to defensive jihad and to advocate violence against the Saudi government and the United States.

Declaration of Jihad. In the early 1990s, Bin Laden emphasized his desire to secure the withdrawal of U.S. and other foreign troops from Saudi Arabia at all costs. Bin Laden criticized the Saudi royal family publicly and alleged that their invitation of foreign troops to the Arabian peninsula constituted an affront to the sanctity of the birthplace of Islam and a betrayal of the global Islamic community.⁴ Finding his rhetoric and efforts rebuffed by Saudi leaders, Bin Laden was expelled from Saudi Arabia and his ire increasingly focused on the United States. Following a period of exile in Sudan and Afghanistan in which his radical views sharpened, Bin Laden issued a declaration of jihad against the United States in 1996 that signaled his emergence as an internationally recognizable figure and offered a full account of his main critiques of an enemy he described as the “alliance of Jews, Christians, and their agents.”⁵ Adopting the sensitive historical and religious imagery of Islamic resistance to the European Crusades, Bin Laden condemned the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia, criticized the international

² For example, in Bin Laden's October 2004 message he referred to specific pre-9/11 interviews with a variety of media outlets as previous indications of Al Qaeda's ideology and demands.

³ For more on Bin Laden and defensive jihad, see James Turner Johnson, “Jihad and Just War,” *First Things*, June/July 2002, pp. 12-14. Bin Laden has identified Salafist thinkers such as his former mentor Abdallah Azzam, Hamas founder Ahmed Yasin, World Trade Center bombing conspirator Omar Abdel Rahman, Saudi dissident clerics Salman Al Awdah and Safar Al Hawali, and 13th century Islamic scholar Ibn Taymiyah as prominent ideological influences. For more on Salafism see CRS Report RS21695, *The Islamic Traditions of Wahhabism and Salafiyya*.

⁴ Robert Fisk, “Interview With Saudi Dissident Bin Ladin” *Independent* (London), July 10, 1996.

⁵ “Declaration of Jihad Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Mosques,” *Al Islah* (London), Sept. 2, 1996.

sanctions regime on Iraq, and voiced his opposition to U.S. support for Israel.⁶ The declaration also cited “massacres in Tajikistan, Burma, Kashmir, Assam, the Philippines, Fatani [as transliterated], Ogaden, Somalia, Eritrea, Chechnya, and Bosnia-Herzegovina” as examples of a growing war on Islam for which the United States should be punished (in spite of the humanitarian nature of U.S. efforts in Bosnia and Somalia).⁷

“Clash of Civilizations.” Following his declaration of jihad on the United States, Bin Laden released a series of statements that expanded the vision and scope of his self-declared conflict with the United States and specified his political prescriptions for the reformation of Islamic societies. Echoing U.S. academic Samuel Huntington’s theory on the impending clash of civilizations,⁸ Bin Laden repeated his characterization of a so-called “new crusade led by America against the Islamic nations,” and emphasized his belief that the emerging conflict between Islam and the West would be fought “between the Islamic world and the Americans and their allies.”⁹ Bin Laden argued that the Islamic world should see itself as one seamless community and that Muslims were obliged to unite and defend themselves. Turning his focus to the internal politics of the Islamic world, Bin Laden urged Muslims to find a leader to unite them and establish a “pious caliphate” that would be governed by Islamic law and follow Islamic principles of finance and social conduct.¹⁰ Bin Laden repeatedly argued that Afghanistan had become a model Islamic state under the Taliban and used religious rhetoric to solicit support for the Taliban¹¹ and Al Qaeda.¹²

Although he possesses no traditional Islamic religious credentials or authority, Bin Laden issued a fatwa, or religious edict, in 1998 that claimed that the United States had made “a clear declaration of war on God, his messenger, and Muslims”¹³ through its policies in the Islamic world. The fatwa made use of the principle of defensive jihad to argue that U.S. aggression made armed resistance and the targeting of American civilians and military personnel incumbent upon all Muslims. The statement also announced the formation of “The World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and Crusaders,” or a United Front between Bin Laden and a number of regional Islamic militant groups. Following Al Qaeda’s bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (1998) and the U.S.S. Cole in Yemen (2000), Bin Laden refused to take direct responsibility for the

⁶ At the time, Bin Laden expressed no solidarity or sympathy for Saddam Hussein or his regime, explaining — “We, as Muslims, do not like the Iraqi regime but we think that the Iraqi people and their children are our brothers and we care about their future.” Fisk, “Interview With Saudi Dissident Bin Ladin” *Independent* (London), July 10, 1996. op. cit.

⁷ “Declaration of Jihad,” *Al Islah* (London), Sept. 2, 1996. op. cit.

⁸ See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon and Schuster, 1998.

⁹ “Correspondent Meets With Opposition Leader Bin Ladin,” *Channel 4* (London) Feb. 20, 1997.

¹⁰ “Pakistan Interviews Usama Bin Ladin,” (Islamabad, Pakistan), Mar. 18, 1997.

¹¹ “Website Publishes Bin Ladin ‘Speech’” *Internet Supporters of Shariah*, June 22, 2000.

¹² “Al Jazirah Program on Bin Laden” *Al Jazirah Television* (Doha, Qatar), June 10, 1999.

¹³ “Text of Fatwa Urging Jihad Against Americans,” *Al Quds Al Arabi* (London), Feb. 23, 1998. The fatwa argued that defensive jihad was necessary “in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque [Jerusalem] and the holy mosque [Mecca] from their grip [the U.S. and Israel].”

attacks, but claimed that he approved of the strikes and shared the motivations of the individuals who had carried them out. Bin Laden argued that the bombings should be seen by Americans and the world as retribution for U.S. policy and compared them to alleged “massacres” of Palestinians in cases familiar to many Muslims and Arabs.¹⁴

Al Qaeda Post-9/11. Osama Bin Laden’s longstanding threats to strike the United States directly came to fruition on September 11, 2001, although prior to October 2004 he only had issued several statements alluding to Al Qaeda’s responsibility for the attacks on New York and Washington. Following an established pattern, Bin Laden acknowledged his support for the hijackers and repeated his claim that strikes on American targets should be viewed by Muslims and Americans as a defensively motivated response to perceived American aggression. Statements attributed to Bin Laden promised further attacks and sought to justify Al Qaeda’s targeting of American civilians by arguing that American society was morally corrupt and that American civilians should be held accountable for the policies of their democratically elected government.¹⁵

Reflecting on the subsequent U.S. response to the attacks, Bin Laden has described the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq as new “crusades” and highlighted the considerable economic impact of the attacks and costs of the U.S. military response as indications of Al Qaeda’s effectiveness. Both Bin Laden and his deputy Ayman Al Zawahiri have criticized the population and governments of the Islamic world for failing to answer their calls to arms and for cooperating with the United States and its allies. These criticisms have been coupled with renewed calls for armed “resistance” against the United States and its allies. Bin Laden has addressed the governments and citizens of Europe and the United States directly in an effort to discourage support for their current policies in the Islamic world. In April 2004, Bin Laden offered Europeans a “truce” if they agreed to abandon their support for the United States and their military commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan. The offer was resoundingly rejected by European leaders and their citizens. On the eve of the U.S. presidential election in October 2004, Bin Laden made a similar statement in which he urged Americans to reevaluate their policies toward the Islamic world and threatened to bleed and bankrupt the United States. In late November 2004, Al Zawahiri stated Al Qaeda’s intention to continue its jihad against the United States indefinitely until its leaders deem “U.S. policy toward Muslims” to be non-aggressive.

Implications for Al Qaeda’s Evolving Ideology and Strategy

Al Qaeda’s Audiences. Experts believe that Osama Bin Laden’s statements contain calculated variations in tone and content that address or appeal to various target audiences. In his early statements, Bin Laden adopted a pseudo-nationalist tone in directly

¹⁴ Bin Laden specifically cited “Sabra, Shatila, Deir Yasin, Qana, Hebron and elsewhere.” “Al Jazirah Program on Bin Laden” *Al Jazirah Television* (Doha, Qatar), June 10, 1999.

¹⁵ “It is a fundamental principle of any democracy that the people choose their leaders, and as such, approve and are party to the actions of their elected leaders... By electing these leaders, the American people have given their consent to the incarceration of the Palestinian people, the demolition of Palestinian homes and the slaughter of the children of Iraq. This is why the American people are not innocent. The American people are active members in all these crimes.” “Statement From Shaykh Usama Bin Ladin, May God Protect Him, and Al Qaeda Organization,” *Al Qal’ah* (Internet), Oct. 14, 2002.

addressing the population of Saudi Arabia and outlining ways that specific groups in Saudi society could support Al Qaeda. In his most recent statements, Bin Laden has downplayed threats of violence and attempted to portray himself as a statesmanlike figure more palatable to Western audiences and appealing to moderate Muslims. However, the cornerstone of Bin Laden's religious rhetoric has remained consistent: Muslims should view themselves as a single nation and unite to resist anti-Islamic aggression on the basis of obligatory defensive jihad. Accordingly, Bin Laden has often coupled his "Islamic-unity" rhetoric with litanies of anti-Semitic statements, condemnations of Israel, and allegations of U.S. complicity in the suffering of Muslims worldwide. In many pre-9/11 statements, Bin Laden broadened his rhetorical outreach to appeal to non-Arab Muslims, especially those concerned with or engaged in conflicts in Chechnya, Bosnia, Kashmir, and the Philippines. Following September 11, 2001, Bin Laden has appealed directly to national groups on the front lines of robust counter-terrorist operations, particularly the populations of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iraq, and the Palestinian territories. Bin Laden's statements also have addressed the American public in several instances that he has characterized as attempts to explain his motives and outline steps he and his followers believe the United States should take in order to avoid future Al Qaeda attacks.

Pragmatic Messianism? Although Bin Laden's ideological rhetoric has remained relatively consistent, the Al Qaeda leader has placed varying levels of emphasis on specific strategic objectives and tactics in his statements over the years. Bin Laden has outlined specific political demands that support the image of Al Qaeda as a pliable, pragmatic political actor. Nevertheless, Al Qaeda's operational record seems to indicate that its leaders' commitment to specific national causes and strategic objectives are rhetorical tools designed to elicit support for their broader ideological agenda of confrontation with the West and puritanical reform in the Islamic world. For example, Bin Laden's rhetorical treatment of the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia during the 1990s is largely inconsistent with Al Qaeda's ongoing terrorist operations there following the almost complete withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Saudi Arabia in September 2003.¹⁶ Although fewer than 250 U.S. military personnel remain in Saudi Arabia, Al Qaeda affiliates have continued a violent campaign to topple the Saudi government and have targeted non-U.S. civilians in numerous terrorist attacks. Similarly, variations in the intensity and prominence of Bin Laden's anti-Israeli rhetoric has fueled suggestions that Al Qaeda's commitment to the Palestinian cause waxes and wanes depending on the network's need for support — becoming more pronounced during periods when Al Qaeda's actions have alienated supporters or recently as part of a more outright ideological appeal. Bin Laden has addressed these charges personally and argued that support for the Palestinians and all Muslims is and will remain essential to Al Qaeda's cause, which is the mobilization of the entire Muslim world in resistance to perceived U.S. aggression.¹⁷ Bin Laden and his deputies have characterized military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq as new provocations and "crusades" that justify ongoing attacks.

¹⁶ In his September 1996 declaration of jihad against the United States, Bin Laden described the presence of U.S. troops in the Arabian peninsula as "one of the worst catastrophes to befall Muslims since the death of the Prophet [Mohammed]." In an earlier interview, however, Bin Laden had indicated that the "the withdrawal of American troops" would serve as the "solution" to the crisis between the United States and the Islamic world.

¹⁷ "Interview Held with Usama Bin Ladin on 21 Oct. 2001," *Jihad Online News*, Jan. 21, 2003.

Tactically, Bin Laden consistently has advocated a program of retributive violence against the United States for alleged crimes against Muslims while demonstrating sophisticated perspectives on cooperation with non-Islamist groups and the economic vulnerabilities of the United States and its allies. In addressing the conflict in Iraq, for example, Bin Laden has encouraged Islamist insurgents to work with “Socialist” groups (Baathists) and compared cooperation between Islamists and Baathists to Arab and Persian collaboration against the Byzantine empire in the 7th and 8th centuries.¹⁸ In calling for Muslims to become more self-sufficient, Bin Laden has urged Arab governments to preserve oil as “a great and important economic power for the coming Islamic state,” and described economic boycotts as “extremely effective”¹⁹ weapons. Bin Laden’s recent description of Al Qaeda’s “bleed-until-bankruptcy plan” fits his established pattern of citing the economic effects of terrorist attacks and could indicate a shift in Al Qaeda’s strategic and tactical planning in favor of a more protracted attritional conflict characterized by disruptive attacks on economic and critical infrastructure. Overall, Al Qaeda has displayed a pragmatic willingness to adapt its statements to changing circumstances while retaining a messianic commitment to its ideological agenda.

Al Qaeda and the Jihadist International. Although Bin Laden’s self-professed goal is to “move, incite, and mobilize the [Islamic] nation”²⁰ until it reaches a revolutionary “ignition point,”²¹ Bin Laden’s statements and Al Qaeda’s attacks largely have failed to effectively mobilize Muslim support for their agenda thus far. Since late 2001, however, public opinion polling and media monitoring in the Middle East and broader Islamic world indicate that significant dissatisfaction with the United States and its foreign policy has grown significantly within many Muslim societies. In light of this trend, Bin Laden’s recent shift toward more moderate, political rhetoric and his emphasis on the economic effectiveness of Al Qaeda’s campaign to date may be harbingers of a renewed attempt by Al Qaeda’s central leadership to broaden the movement’s appeal, solicit greater material support, and possibly inspire new and more systematically devastating attacks. Experience suggests that Al Qaeda’s leaders believe that regular attempts to characterize Al Qaeda’s actions as defensive and religiously sanctioned will increase tolerance of and support for their broader ideological program. The identification of limited political objectives and the implication that their fulfillment will resolve broader grievances also may help to mask the group’s underlying ideological agenda. Overall, Bin Laden’s statements from the mid-1990s through the present indicate that he continues to see himself and his followers as the vanguard of an international Islamic movement primarily committed to ending U.S. “interference” in the affairs of Islamic countries and supportive of efforts to overturn and recast Islamic societies according to narrow Salafist interpretations of Islam and Islamic law. His public statements, and those of his deputies, will likely continue to play an important, calculated role in reaching these goals.

¹⁸ Bin Laden sanctioned cooperation with Baathists “despite our belief in the infidelity of socialists.” “Usama Bin Ladin’s Message to Iraq,” *Al-Jazirah Television*, Feb. 11, 2003.

¹⁹ “Declaration of Jihad” *Al Islah* (London), September 2, 1996. op. cit.

²⁰ “Usama Bin Ladin’s Message to Iraq,” *Al-Jazirah Television*, Feb. 11, 2003. Op. cit.

²¹ “Bin Ladin Interviewed on Jihad Against US,” *Al Quds Al Arabi* (London), Nov. 27, 1996.