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What Osama's Really Saying

CCS Analysis

On November 29, a new missive from Osama bin Laden was released to the world. The message came first to the news outlet al Jeezera,¹ where most of his messages have been passed, and at the time of writing, it has not been confirmed by the intelligence community that it is in fact Bin Laden. Assuming it is, however, the message bears some very real implications for the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan.

In the message, among other things, bin Laden said that Europe would do well to withdraw from Afghanistan as "the American tide is receding."² Afghanistan and other nations reacted quickly, saying that the mission in Afghanistan was a united one between the government of Afghanistan and international forces, and that a withdrawal of foreign forces was not an option and that security in that country was "...an international responsibility."³ President Karzai went further and called the idea of a European withdrawal "ridiculous."⁴ As Iraq (relatively) stabilizes, however, and even the staunchest of allies such as Australia pull out of that country, troop commitments in Afghanistan will be subjects of debate in a number of European capitals. Furthermore, as security deteriorates in Afghanistan, many at home and abroad are increasingly viewing the situation there as a quagmire.⁵ Bin Laden's words have no bearing among the international forces, but it does show that he has a certain understanding of the international politics at play in Afghanistan, and is desperate to exploit divisions among the allies.

Bin Laden also claimed full responsibility for the attacks of September 11, 2001, and said that the Taliban knew nothing of the plot beforehand, saying "I am the one responsible... The Afghan people and government knew nothing whatsoever about these events."⁶ This is the most important part of his transmission, meant not for European capitals so much as the Karzai government and its U.S. allies. The Taliban has been making overtures to the Afghan government, seeking a negotiated settlement.⁷ There are elements within the Taliban that are not happy being grouped with extremists such as former commanders Mullah Dadullah and Jalaluddin Haqqani, and are seeking to join a new Afghan government. Former Taliban have already been incorporated into the government at the district and provincial levels; their further assimilation is entirely possible.

Why would bin Laden push for this? He owes the Taliban, and he knows it. Without their support, and that of their tribal brethren, he could easily have been captured or killed in the wilds of Afghanistan after 9/11. He ruined, almost single-handedly, their first government, although it is debatable how much they knew of it beforehand. What is clear is that no matter how much the Taliban knew of the 9/11 plot before it took place, they did not anticipate in any way the fierce reaction from the United States. Now bin Laden wants to remove the original stain on the Taliban reputation that led to their downfall.

We expect the Taliban to continue a twin pronged offensive; militarily to prove they can still be effective and to point out the current government of Afghanistan's weakness, and diplomatically as they pursue negotiations. They know violence alone will not bring them any closer to power; after their last period of rule, less than 5% of Afghanistan wants them back in power.⁸

It is now up to the Afghan government and the allies what they want to do with these Taliban overtures. Bin Laden's pronouncement shows some seriousness missing from their previous attempts at negotiations, when they demanded all foreign forces withdraw, all Taliban prisoners be released, and power over ten southern key provinces.⁹ Moderate elements of the Taliban do exist and should be incorporated into the government. Bin Laden is not one of them, however, and any claims he makes should be taken with a bucket of salt.

Negotiations are important, and as previous Afghan conflicts have shown, inevitable. On the one hand, the government and allies must beware of throwing out the baby with the bathwater; i.e. dismissing patriotic Pashtun tribal leaders for mistakes made long ago when the Taliban was the power in Southern Afghanistan. On the other hand, the government must be wary of Greeks bearing gifts; any recommendation from bin Laden certainly falls into this category.

Careful study and in-depth analysis of former Taliban leaders will give the best indication of who can be trusted. Bin Laden's pronouncement should be ignored at the risk of making some too willing to negotiate, or others too hesitant. His moment of influence in Afghan politics ended long ago.

¹ "Halt US aid, bin Laden urges Europe," *Al Jazeera*, 29 November 2007 <<http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/79D8DF58-6E10-40BE-8E32-E485906623C9.htm>> (29 November 2007), and "Messages From Bin Laden Since 9-11," *Associated Press*, 30 November 2007 <<http://ap.google.com/article/ALeqM5g37p1JyIJxPEIH6026z8CbOqp-hQD8T7KTQ80>> (30 November 2007).

² "'Bin Laden message' to Europeans," *BBC News*, 29 November 2007 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7119803.stm> (29 November 2007).

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- ³ “Osama call will not affect war on terror,” *Daily Times*, 1 December 2007
<http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2007%5C12%5C01%5Cstory_1-12-2007_pg4_17> (1 December 2007).
- ⁴ “Bin Laden’s call ‘ridiculous’: Afghan president,” *Agence France-Presse*, 30 November 2007
<<http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5jNeyivNS2MTMsiGYwXluKjedtM4A>> (30 November 2007).
- ⁵ Jonathan Karl and Luis Martinez, “Afghanistan Now Most Dangerous for U.S. Troops,” *American Broadcast Company*, 30 November 2007
<<http://www.abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=3937323&page=1>> (30 November 2007).
- ⁶ Firouz Sedarat, “Bin Laden urges Europe to quit Afghanistan,” *Reuters*, 29 November 2007
<http://www.reuters.com/article/homepageCrisis/idUSL29129119.CH_.2400> (29 November 2007).
- ⁷ “Karzai says Taliban make contact for Afghan peace,” *Times of India*, 23 November 2007
<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/World/Rest_of_World/Karzai_says_Taliban_make_contact_for_Afghan_peace/articleshow/2563180.cms> (24 November 2007).
- ⁸ “Afghans ‘still hopeful on future,’” *BBC News*, 3 December 2007
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7124450.stm> (3 December 2007).
- ⁹ Declan Walsh and Sami Yousafzai, “Taliban sets out demands to Afghan president,” *The Guardian*, 15 October 2007 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/afghanistan/story/0,2191310,00.html?gusrc=rss&feed=12>> (3 December 2007).