

Voices from the Cave: "Bin Laden" Speaks

Written by

Monday, 24 April 2006 11:47 - Last Updated Monday, 24 April 2006 11:47

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AG - Tom Porteous - Just how many Arabs and Muslims actually take seriously Bin Laden's analysis of Sudan, Palestine, Iraq or any other Middle Eastern issue is of course an important -- a crucial -- question. We know from polls that U.S. prestige has plummeted throughout the Middle East (and indeed in much of the rest of the world) since the invasion of Iraq. But what is not clear is how far there has been a corresponding increase in support for Bin Ladenism. In spite of President Bush's post 9/11 "with-us-or-against-us" rhetoric, the fact that a majority of Arabs and Muslims are now deeply opposed Mr. Bush's policies does not necessarily mean they are "with the terrorists."

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Bin Laden's Tape Tom Porteous

Agence Global
April 24, 2006

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Tom Porteous looks beneath the spectacle of "the latest Bin Laden tape" and shows Bin Laden's historical views to be as perverse as his morality. Still, the United States seems bent on handing Bin Laden influential sway over the Muslim world.

Osama Bin Laden's latest anti-Western rant shows that his grasp of history is as flawed as his grasp of morality.

But it also indicates that that he is still an adept master of exploiting the flaws of U.S. counter-terrorism policies as well as the prejudices, fears and resentments of millions of Arab Muslims in an increasingly polarized post 9/11 world.

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The focus of Bin Laden's latest tape recording, broadcast on Al-Jazeera on 23 April, was Sudan. His self-serving analysis takes mendacity to extraordinary levels: the West is blamed for the disaster in Darfur; the United States is accused of seeking to divide Sudan between North and South; and Britain is accused of having divided the Sudan from Egypt back in colonial times.

In fact, responsibility for the holocaust taking place in Western Sudan, in which the victims (hundreds of thousands of them) are all Muslims, lies not with "Zionist Crusaders" but lies squarely on the shoulders of Bin Laden's own erstwhile protectors, the Islamists in the Khartoum regime who provided Al-Qaeda with sanctuary in the 1990s.

The 2005 Sudanese peace agreement, a rare recent success of U.S. foreign policy, which has brought to an end fifty years of bloodshed in southern Sudan, provides for self determination for the South: The mostly non-Muslim population of southern Sudan will decide for themselves in a referendum in 2011 whether they want to remain part of a united Sudan or to secede.

As for the claim that Britain divided Sudan from Egypt, the opposite is in fact the truth: The British colonial authorities aided and abetted the Egyptian re-colonization of Sudan in 1899 when the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium was established -- and the Sudanese were glad to be rid of both the Egyptians and the British when they achieved independence half a century ago.

However, Bin Laden is not about to let the truth spoil his message on Sudan or anywhere else. He portrays the West's humanitarian intervention in Darfur as yet another example of the West's long military domination of the Muslim world, another front in his own "Long War" against the "Crusader" enemy.

This interpretation is as absurd as it is ironic. In fact, the United States and its allies have failed to put together a military coalition strong enough to stop the desperate tragedy in Darfur. This is partly because they have no vital strategic interests in Western Sudan, but also because since the invasion of Iraq the United States' prestige is so low that it can ill afford to undertake another military intervention that would be perceived in the Arab world as a further infringement of Arab sovereignty.

For those inhabitants of the Arab and Muslim "street" who are minded to take Bin Laden's

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comments about Sudan seriously, it matters little that his judgmental, black-and-white vision of the world does not tally either with the awkward facts of Sudanese history or with the complexities of local politics.

Just how many Arabs and Muslims actually take seriously Bin Laden's analysis of Sudan, Palestine, Iraq or any other Middle Eastern issue is of course an important -- a crucial -- question. We know from polls that U.S. prestige has plummeted throughout the Middle East (and indeed in much of the rest of the world) since the invasion of Iraq. But what is not clear is how far there has been a corresponding increase in support for Bin Ladenism. In spite of President Bush's post 9/11 "with-us-or-against-us" rhetoric, the fact that a majority of Arabs and Muslims are now deeply opposed Mr. Bush's policies does not necessarily mean they are "with the terrorists."

Two important points stand out quite clearly, however. First, Arab and Muslim publics are currently acutely vulnerable to the extremist ideology of prophets like Bin Laden. It is essential that policymakers seeking to undercut Bin Laden's message should understand the reasons for this vulnerability: widespread illiteracy (especially among Arabs) and ignorance; the deliberate promotion of Islamist propaganda by regimes in the Muslim world (including the West's closest allies) in pursuit of narrow survivalist agendas; authoritarianism and suppression of free speech; and a string of all too real political and social defeats, failures and humiliations.

The second point is that current U.S. and British policies in the Middle East could hardly be better designed to encourage the political resentments, frustrations and the pervasive sense of helplessness and lack of control that undercut the efforts of political moderates and fuel political extremism and terrorism. These policies include: military and political interventions in Iraq and elsewhere; the threat of further intervention in Iran; the justification of human rights abuses in the name of a war on terror; the refusal to engage with Islamists of any color, even those with democratic mandates, on the grounds that they are terrorists; and, the recent U-turn on democratization.

Whether seen from the perspective of Bin Laden's Long War against the Crusaders or through the prism of the United States' Long War against terrorism, the battle for hearts and minds is what will decide the outcome of this escalating conflict. At the moment it is a battle in which the United States and its allies seem bent on handing victory to the most reactionary and violent forces in the Muslim world.

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Released: 25 April 2006

Word Count: 870

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Advisory Release: 25 April 2006

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