

## **Palestine matters**

By Imtiaz Gul, Islamabad, Pakistan

Osama bin Laden's latest message to President Barack Obama loosely coincided with the British Foreign Secretary David Miliband's visit to Washington, as he stated last week before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that al Qaeda's central command is still present on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, while spelling out a few of the details of this week's international conference on Afghanistan hosted by the British government on January 28.

While the U.S. and the U.K. are attempting to chalk out a new strategy to defeat al Qaeda and its Afghan affiliates in Afghanistan, bin Laden's message, reportedly delivered to one of the regional offices of the Doha-based Al Jazeera TV in Pakistan, warned of more attacks if the Palestinian crisis remains unresolved. "America will never dream of living in peace unless we live it in Palestine. It is unfair that you enjoy a safe life while our brothers in Gaza suffer greatly. Therefore, with God's will, our attacks on you will continue as long as you continue to support Israel," bin Laden said.

The al Qaeda leader also claimed responsibility for the recent failed attack on a U.S. airliner on December 25, 2009, pointedly commenting, "If it was possible to carry our messages to you by words we wouldn't have carried them to you by planes." The Nigerian Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab attempted to blow up his plane as it approached Detroit airport on Christmas Day, but the explosive powder he was hiding in his underwear failed to detonate fully. He later told federal agents that he had been trained and given the explosives by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, an al Qaeda-inspired offshoot in bin Laden's ancestral homeland of Yemen.

The minute-long bin Laden message aired by al Jazeera merits scrutiny in the current regional context -- namely, the expected influx of U.S. troops into Afghanistan, bringing the total number of U.S. forces to around 100,000 with the aim of flushing out the some 100-odd top al Qaeda operatives from the Pak-Afghan border regions.

Firstly, although a bin Laden tape has never been shown to be a fabrication, the veracity of the brief message should not be automatically assumed and we should wait for authentication by intelligence agencies that this is an original statement, not a collage of words plucked from earlier missives and speeches.

Secondly, that caveat aside, the renewed focus on the Palestinian issue is as an intriguing spin on the political ideology recently propagated by bin Laden or his deputy Dr. Ayman al Zawahiri. The last two tapes by Zawahiri, for instance, dealt mainly with Pakistan. And the last public message from bin Laden himself, "Message to the People of Europe," surfaced via Al-Jazeera on Sept. 25 last year when he demanded that European countries pull their troops out of Afghanistan or face retaliation.

Thirdly, bin Laden's claim of responsibility for the Christmas Day bombing attempted has prompted immediate speculation about how much control he exercises over the various franchises of his organization from Afghanistan to Iraq to Yemen to Somalia. There is little doubt that the Yemen-based group, partially made up of fighters who were once bodyguards of the terrorist leader, would be closer to him than other affiliates.

Fourthly, some may argue that bin Laden is losing his grip on the cobweb of al Qaeda affiliates across the world, but if the situation inside Afghanistan and Pakistan is any indicator, his influence cuts across national borders. The pincer approach -- pressure by suspected U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan's troubled northwest and by U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, along with the military campaign by the Pakistani Army -- has exposed al Qaeda and its Afghan and Pakistani partners to great challenges. But bin Laden and Zawahiri keep attempting to reassure their followers of their commitment to the causes they stand for -- fighting Western forces in Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan, among others.

Fifth, some analysts say bin Laden's focus on the close U.S.-Israeli relationship in this tape may result from his worry about Obama's popularity across the Middle East. Rohan Gunaratna, author of *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*, argues the bin Laden message appeared to be an attempt to stay relevant. "The Palestinian conflict was never part of the al Qaeda original mandate, but Osama is clearly exploiting it," Gunaratna told the AP. The message could therefore be interpreted as a ploy to re-emphasize bin Laden's commitment to the Palestinian cause as well as an attempt to reinvigorate the spirit among the rank and file of al Qaeda.

The brief audio message from al Qaeda's leader thus underscores desperation within the ranks of al Qaeda, an organization that has over the past several years been forced to shift its command structure from Afghanistan to the border regions of Pakistan, where it finds its space rapidly shrinking. Increasingly, effective drone attacks on targets in Pakistan's northwest have wiped out members of al Qaeda's leadership, and also focus on Uzbek allies led by Tahir Yuldashev, the Haqqani network, and the anti-government Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan. The Predator drones, which hover over the Waziristan regions around the clock, have struck at least 11 times this year. Additionally, the Pakistani Army's advance on South Waziristan last fall

appears to have dislodged the TTP and its al Qaeda allies from their strongholds, truncating their capabilities to train for terrorism missions in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and abroad -- a huge blow to the organization's central leadership, which had taken advantage of the mountainous, poorly governed border area.

Bin Laden's latest message aims to inspire his followers as they probably deal with low morale, in the face of increased pressure from all sides.

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