

BIN LADEN TAPE *Hagai Segal*

# Psychological warfare, al-Qaeda style

After 13 months of silence, our old friend Osama bin Laden is back. Promising that "jihad is continuing", and that attacks on US soil are imminent, al-Qaeda's founder surfaced last week to remind us that he is as determined as ever to perpetuate terrorist atrocities.

Yet, despite bin Laden's attempts to sell us the notion of a powerful and flourishing al-Qaeda network, the latest message has helped to remind us that the converse is actually the case.

It is almost 4½ years since the September 11 attacks, during which time al-Qaeda has not struck in America. In this latest audio recording, the world's most-wanted man claimed that "this was not due to failure to breach US security measures", and that such "operations are under preparation".

But the fact that bin Laden has now felt obliged to release a statement – attempting to explain away this failure to strike the US again – speaks volumes. For the plain fact is that, since losing their Afghan base and the patronage of the Taliban, al-Qaeda has been forced to operate

from the shadows. Without significant funding, their numbers slashed and their military resources profoundly diminished, they are no longer capable of mounting operations on the scale of September 11.

This latest tape is thus part of a strategy to create an alternate perception – al-Qaeda's latest psychological ploy. In recent years it has adeptly manipulated our mass media to ensure that, despite its operational limitations, it remains a constant in our thoughts.

Al-Qaeda now understands that if it kills 10 people in Iraq it will likely receive little or no coverage, but that if it records the attack, the video will lead the TV news that night. And when there are no al-

Qaeda attacks, another tape appears on Al-Jazeera to return them to our front pages and ensure hours of over-analysis on 24-hour news television.

Bin Laden's call for a *hudna* – a limited ceasefire – is itself another psychological gambit, a subtly constructed subterfuge designed to muddle and divide global public opinion. But there can be no bargaining with bin Laden: while his terms may seem to be a reasonable demand for a US withdrawal from Afghanistan and/or Iraq, he is in fact soliciting our surrender,

offering nothing in return. Al-Qaeda remains a threat: it will attack again, and soon. Last year it struck England, Jordan and

Egypt. In November, cells (probably belonging to al-Qaeda and its affiliate, Jemaah Islamiyah) were broken up in Australia as they planned to bomb Sydney and Melbourne. Its affiliate "al-Qaeda in Iraq" continues to play its part in the insurgency in that country. But it is also patently apparent that al-Qaeda's reach and scope of operations is shrinking.

Bin Laden's terror network will be a part of our lives for some time to come, dedicated as it is to terrorising the globe and undermining the fabric of our societies. But it is moving away from the centre of the world's attention as we adapt to the reality of modern terrorism – and as, slowly but surely, its blade gets ever blunter.

The psychological war will continue unabated, but it can only succeed if we let it. It's about time we got off bin Laden's emotional roller coaster.

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