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OSAMA BIN LADEN'S PEACE OVERTURE: A strategic shift or a new threat?

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European leaders have roundly rebuffed a peace overture from the AlQaeda network, maintaining that they would not negotiate terms with terrorists. They were referring to the latest audiotape message of the Saudi-born Osama bin Laden, broadcast by two Arabic TV channels on 14 April 2004, offering a truce to European countries and vowing vengeance to the United States. European and American commentators regarded the overture as a blatant attempt to divide the trans-Atlantic alliance in the global war against terrorism and the war in Iraq.

The core of bin Laden's "peace initiative" to the European people was a promise to suspend all operations against countries that pledged not to commit aggression against the Muslims or to meddle in their affairs. He responded to the positive indications that most European people wanted peace, and addressed the following points to them: the killings in their countries and Muslim countries made clear that injustice was inflicted on both sides by their (European) politicians who sent their sons to the latter countries to kill and be killed. Therefore it was in both sides' interests to foil the schemes of those who shed the blood of peoples for their narrow personal interest and the wishes of the White House (USA).

In sum he wanted the Muslims and the people of Europe to join hands to defeat the conspiracy of the United States and Israel against the Muslim world. He called on Muslim clerics, intellectuals and businessmen to form a permanent body to use the mass media to enlighten the European people about the justness of their cause, particularly the issue of Palestine.

The AlQaeda leader rejected the label of "terrorism" applied to them and their actions. It was by default a description of the accusers themselves and their actions, he said. "Our actions are but a reaction to your actions which amount to the destruction and the killings of our people in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine." Osama promised to exact revenge on America for the killing of the spiritual leader of Hamas, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, in Gaza, Palestine. He said those who benefited from igniting the war and shedding blood were the warmongers and bloodsuckers who were steering world policy from behind a screen. Identifying the Zionist lobby as representing the most dangerous and hardest component of the group he declared AlQaeda's determination to fight them.

However for those who wanted peace, bin Laden said, the door was open for three months from the date of the statement. The peace initiative would start with the departure of a European country's troops from Muslim lands. The peace agreement was subject to renewal by a country's succeeding government, by mutual consent of both parties. The statement did not specify with whom and where the European states should enter into a peace agreement

and what operations would be suspended by AlQaeda. However it justified the attacks against the Russians, Europeans and Americans as reactions to their invasions, respectively, of Afghanistan and Chechnya, Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Arabian Peninsula as well as supporting “the Jews in Palestine.” “So stop shedding our blood so that you may spare your lives,” he added.

Analysis

The 14 April statement gives a hint that the AlQaeda is prepared to launch more attacks after the three-month truce. “He who rejects peace and opts for war, then we are for it.” The peace offer could also indicate a strategic shift of its area of operation, from multiple fronts in Europe to a limited and focused targeting of the United States.

The call to the Muslim ummah to establish a body for the propagation of the AlQaeda’s just cause may indicate a signal to AlQaeda members to form a political wing to conduct ideological and political campaigns as part of a larger war against the enemy.

Islamic Views

The Muslim world leaders generally reacted coolly to Osama bin Laden’s message. However Islamic scholars note that the offer of peace (*sulh*) by Osama has a basis in Islam. The Islamic law of war permits Muslims to enter into peace agreements with their enemies. It is mentioned in the Quran: “*And if they incline to peace then incline to it and trust in Allah; surely he is all hearing and all knowing.*”(Quran: 8:61). They recall that Prophet Muhammad had entered into a peace agreement with the people of Makkah, which was called the Treat of Hudaibiyah, which was signed for a 10-year period. Muslim scholars are not in agreement on two issues: a) what should be the duration of a peace agreement and b) whether a peace agreement with non-Muslims could be permanent or should be temporary. Some traditional scholars and *jihadis* share the view that only a temporary peace agreement is allowed, with the period to be decided by the ruler.

As for the likely shift in strategy signalled by the peace offer, some contemporary scholars have commented that one of the Prophet’s war strategies is always to maintain one enemy or battlefield at one time. Citing his peace agreement with the Jews and other Arab tribes while at war with the Makkans, they point out that it was only after he signed a peace agreement with Makkah that he launched military operations against the Jews at their fort of Khaibar.

Another question is whether Osama will keep his word to respect a three-month truce or peace agreement. According to the Quran fulfilment of such a promise is an obligation: “*Oh you who believe! Fulfil (your) obligations.*(Quran:5:1), and “*So fulfil their treaty to them for the end of their term.*”(Quran 9:4).

Conclusion

From the above analysis it is assessed that

- a) Osama bin Laden has offered a cessation of attacks to those European countries that agree to withdraw their troops from Afghanistan and Iraq (like the new Spanish Government has done);
- b) AlQaeda will mount a political and ideological campaign to sway European public opinion against their governments’ support of US policies in those countries and Palestine; and

c) AlQaeda plans to launch fresh attacks against those countries which continue to be involved in military operations in Muslim lands, especially the United States.

As previous audiotaped messages from AlQaeda have been aired just before attacks by AlQaeda or its associate groups, it is likely that the release of the latest message from Osama bin Laden is a warning of another attack to come against a European or American target, should his peace offer be rejected or ignored.

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