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Bin Laden Tape Signals Al Qaeda, Taliban Still Close

In speaking up for the Taliban, Osama bin Laden signals that hopes for a split between Al Qaeda and certain factions of the Taliban are still just that.

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Osama bin Laden's latest audio tape threatening retaliation for U.S. support of the crackdown on militants in Pakistan seemed to throw cold water on the idea that Al Qaeda and the Taliban could be going their separate ways.

The tape was broadcast Wednesday by Al-Jazeera as President Obama touched down in Saudi Arabia to start a three-day Mideast trip. In the tape, bin Laden accuses the United States of sowing "new seeds of hatred against America" for supporting Pakistan's fight against the Taliban in the Swat region of the country.

In speaking up for the Taliban, bin Laden signaled that speculation about a split between Al Qaeda and certain factions of the Taliban may have been wishful thinking.

Malou Innocent, a foreign policy analyst with the Cato Institute, said bin Laden's message was a sign that his network continues to fund and support the factions that make up the multilayered and scattered Taliban. Though the Taliban is a more indigenous group with more local goals than Al Qaeda, Innocent said they continue to cooperate, "for the sake of unifying against a common enemy."

"For the time being, Pakistan has an unwieldy problem on their hands, something that will not go away anytime soon," Innocent said. "The Al Qaeda-Taliban linkage is destabilizing for both (Pakistan and Afghanistan)."

U.S. officials, as well as Afghan President Hamid Karzai, have tried to coax Taliban fighters into rejecting Al Qaeda. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in March that those who do so "should be offered an honorable form of reconciliation and reintegration into a peaceful society."

Obama just weeks earlier, in an interview with the New York Times, had floated the idea of courting moderate elements of the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan, suggesting the U.S. could replicate its success in persuading Sunni insurgents in Iraq to reject Al Qaeda.

So far, no dice.

Innocent said the U.S. might have more success courting factions on the fringes of the Taliban, particularly those in Afghanistan who could have an interest in claiming a stake in a new Afghan regime.

Afghanistan still poses some promise for inviting so-called moderates into the mainstream and away from the influence of Al Qaeda, said Danielle Pletka, with the American Enterprise Institute, but the Taliban groups in Pakistan appear more intractable.

"They really are the bad guys," she said.

For now, Pletka said, Al Qaeda and Taliban forces remain loosely affiliated and driven by similar aims.

"These are all Taliban groups, and in fact they're all Al Qaeda," she said.

She said the bin Laden tape doesn't necessarily reveal anything new other than to underscore that "our efforts are bothering bin Laden, which is good."

In the new tape, bin Laden accused the Obama of stoking hatred of America by ordering Pakistan to crack down on militants in its Swat Valley region. Those actions caused an exodus of civilian Muslims, whom bin Laden described as fleeing the "killing, fighting, bombing and destruction."

Obama administration officials downplayed bin Laden's tape, describing it as a distraction and signaling U.S. officials were not fazed by the inflammatory rhetoric in the latest tirade.

"I don't think it's surprising that Al Qaeda would shift attention from the president's historic efforts and continued efforts to have an open dialogue with the Muslim world," White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs said.

The White House has not had an opportunity to review the audio tape in its entirety, Gibbs said, but all indications so far are that this is the same type of Al Qaeda threat against the U.S. and other countries that is common when those countries are engaging in counterterrorism efforts.

The release of the bin Laden tape comes at a time when Obama is carrying out a deliberate and highly visible effort to sway Muslim sentiment towards the United States.

He's slated to make a speech Thursday in Cairo aimed at smoothing U.S.-Muslim relations, marking what White House aides say will be a "new chapter of engagement between the U.S. and the Muslim world."

"You have the leader of the free world speaking from one of the great cities in the world, and you have bin Laden speaking from an undisclosed location," State Department spokesman Philip Crowley said. "And that speaks volumes in terms of the contrast."

He said officials assume the tape is authentic, though it hasn't yet been verified.

Richard Holbrooke, the U.S. special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, said it's "ludicrous" to suggest that anyone but Al Qaeda and the Taliban are responsible for the refugee crisis in Pakistan.

FOXNews.com's Judson Berger and FOX News' Kelly Chernenkoff and The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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