

The 9/11 Anniversary Tape: Singing an Old Song with a New Tune

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Four days prior to the fifth anniversary of the tragic events of 9/11, Al-Qaeda released a new video featuring terrorists training for the attack, as well as Osama Bin Laden meeting Ramzi Binalshibh, one of the key masterminds behind the deadly plot. The tape also included previously unseen footage of two of the 9/11 hijackers, Hamza al-Ghamdi and Wael Al-Shehri, delivering their pre-recorded last wills. Whereas on the surface the video does not seem to bring anything new to the table, in reality it does highlight – for the first time and of its own accord – Al-Qaeda claiming direct responsibility for the attacks. More importantly, it also hints at concerted efforts on the part of the terrorist network to set a new tone for its campaign, in light of global developments post 9/11.

The Question of Timing

As clichéd as it may sound, the answer to the question of the video's timing is the most obvious one. Released only a few of days prior to the fifth anniversary of the catastrophic event, the tape is a ghastly reminder of the intense preparations and the blood-chilling resolve of its key perpetrators. It provides intimate details of their lifestyle in an Afghanistan training camp, in addition to the terrorist techniques that they mastered leading up to 9/11. Since the world is already familiar with their names and their roles, the question remains why this footage is being released only now, five years later.

The answer might be a very straightforward one. Similar to the strategic reassessment that various governments around the globe are undertaking in terms of the efficiency of their counter-terrorism efforts, Al-Qaeda is mirroring their agenda and engaging in a parallel exercise. The perspectives, however, are radically different. Whereas the terrorist assaults marked a tragic threshold for the United States and its people, for Al-Qaeda they remain the “blessed raids,” the raids that demonstrated to the world what a small group of Arab youth, indoctrinated and trained by a shadowy terrorist network, could accomplish against the symbols of American power, the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

In a nutshell, the message is one of empowerment. By using footage of the hijackers training for the attack and by showing Bin Laden overseeing their preparations, the video essentially reaffirms the main concepts and the key methods behind Al-Qaeda's struggle. In an asymmetric conflict ruled by stark disparities of power, the grand equalizer is the continued resolve of a few young men to follow in the footsteps of the “blessed 19.” Bin Laden himself articulates this message as veiled words of support to all potential terrorists: “Talk yourselves into martyrdom operations, encourage yourselves a lot. At the beginning you will not be used to the idea, and you will think it is a difficult thing.” In light of other Al-Qaeda recordings, his words ring evocatively true of the suicidal determination that this terrorist network seeks to impart to jihadists worldwide.

Jihadist Propaganda on the Rise

Although not new, such rhetoric is also paired with a much more sophisticated propaganda campaign. Ever since the start of the war in Iraq, As-Sahab Media Corporation – the company that films, edits, and releases the majority of Al-Qaeda's videos – has been somewhat outflanked by other jihadist media outlets. From the professional recordings circulated by insurgent groups in Iraq to the jihadist forums parading as video production and dissemination channels, Al-Qaeda's media branch has had to struggle hard to stay atop the rising propaganda tide. To accomplish this, it has enhanced the quality of its own productions. Matching improvements in plot, digital editing, and overall presentation that other jihadist media had achieved, As-Sahab has revamped its own content and techniques.

The new 9/11 anniversary tape is a dazzling example. Its most striking feature is the ease with which footage from older recordings is mixed with seamless aplomb. In addition to images of Bin Laden, Abu Hamza al-Masri, and the 9/11 hijackers, the tape also includes captions of Bin Laden's late

mentor Abdullah Azzam, the Saudi Sheikh El-Hamood Bin Uqla Al-Shuaybi, and the American-born jihadist Adam Gadahn. The list reads as a who's who of Al-Qaeda, and grants the video a much wider currency in jihadist circles. More importantly, it also presents different analyses from different stages of Al-Qaeda's development, all of them cumulatively building up to the 9/11 attacks.

Another important innovation is the addition of English subtitles. Introduced as a practice only a few months ago, this refurbishing of Al-Qaeda's propaganda to suit its global campaign seeks direct contact with the English-speaking world, in addition to the Arabic-speaking one. This includes not only Muslim minorities in Europe and North America, but the West in general. Given the increasing importance of converts to Islam in terrorist operations matching Al-Qaeda's, the efforts of As-Sahab Media to broaden its constituency base should not be dismissed as a light undertaking. And what better way to attract and to focus the world's attention than by showcasing its grandest attack?

Does the Tape Reveal Anything New?

An important piece of new evidence that the 9/11 anniversary tape introduces is the previously unseen footage of hijackers Hamza Al-Ghamdi and Wael Al-Shehri reading their last wills. Their appearance is notable because it challenges long held assumptions about the role played by fifteen of the nineteen hijackers in the attacks. According to most security and intelligence agencies, these men were co-opted at the last stages of preparation and might not even have known that they were on a suicide mission.

Their pre-recorded statements conclusively repudiate such theories. For one, both men were clearly aware that they will be martyred in the attacks. More importantly, they also linked their reasons for participating to the atrocities perpetrated against Muslims in Bosnia and Chechnya. As individuals, who either voiced the intention or actively went and fought with Islamist fighters in these conflict areas, their statements bring a new international dimension to the 9/11 operation.

Such personalization of the motivation for violence is also significant because it marks attempts on the part of Al-Qaeda to recast the 9/11 attacks in a new light. Given the vitriolic dispute that these acts of aggression have spurred in Islamist circles, Bin Laden and his associates are trying to reclaim some of their lost legitimacy by portraying them as retaliatory strikes instead. In light of the crackdown that the Islamist movement has suffered post-9/11 and the sore spots that Bosnia and Chechnya still occupy in the imagination of Muslims worldwide, Al-Qaeda is recalibrating its propaganda to capitalize on these new and old feelings of oppression and guilt.

In summary, the 9/11 anniversary tape portrays familiar themes with a new spin. Although most of the footage is old material, the way it is edited and presented weaves a new narrative of the attacks. This narrative is an attempt by Al-Qaeda not only to reclaim the public spotlight, but also to readjust its campaign to suit the exigencies of the new environment. Despite continued emphasis on suicide operations and terrorist training, it also tries to respond to internal criticism about the Islamic legitimacy of its attacks. Whether this is a sign of weakness or a sign of strength is anybody's guess.

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