

Bin Laden Says West Is Waging War Against Islam

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By [MICHAEL SLACKMAN](#)

CAIRO, April 23 — [Osama bin Laden](#) denounced what he called a "Zionist-crusaders war on Islam" in an audiotape broadcast Sunday, pointing to the isolation of the [Hamas](#)-led Palestinian government, talk of a Western peacekeeping force in [Sudan](#) and Muslim outrage over Danish cartoons mocking the Prophet Muhammad as new evidence of a clash of civilizations.

His voice sounding strong and combative, Mr. bin Laden implied that killing American civilians was justified, beseeched Muslims to fight any Sudan peacekeeping force and called for the creators of the offensive cartoons to be turned over to [Al Qaeda](#) for punishment.

The audiotape, broadcast by Al Jazeera and deemed authentic by American intelligence officials and terrorism experts, was Mr. bin Laden's second in three months and the first in which he has raised Sudan as a possible new battleground where Muslims should go to fight. The tape appeared intended not only to re-establish his role as a sort of supreme guide for Al Qaeda, but also to inform his enemies that he is acutely aware of current news events that reflect violent confrontation between Islam and the West.

While Al Qaeda had previously criticized Hamas leaders for participating in Palestinian elections, Mr. bin Laden sought to tap into the wide public support among Arabs for Hamas, which Israel, the United States and the [European Union](#) regard as a terrorist organization.

"The blockade which the West is imposing on the government of Hamas proves that there is a Zionist-crusaders war on Islam," he said.

[Scott McClellan](#), the White House press secretary, told reporters traveling with President Bush in California that the White House believed the bin Laden tape to be authentic and that the president had been informed of its existence early Sunday morning. Mr.

McClellan also said that "the Al Qaeda leadership is on the run and under a lot of pressure."

Although there was no way to absolutely confirm the tape's authenticity, terrorism experts said it was credible in part because it hewed closely to Mr. bin Laden's ideological and tactical profile. While Mr. bin Laden did not mention the American occupation of Iraq in the portions of the tape that were broadcast, he focused on three issues that have resounded across the Arab and Muslim worlds: efforts of the West to isolate Hamas; calls for sending Western peacekeeping troops into the Darfur region of Sudan to stop the killing of civilians; and the outrage over the Danish cartoons.

As in the past, Hamas sought to distance itself from Al Qaeda and its leadership. But Sami Abu Zuhri, a spokesman for Hamas, said Western financial penalties against the Palestinian Authority government it now leads were a source of anger for Muslims around the region.

"We have warned many times that the siege upon Hamas and the policy of hunger will create a situation of hatred in Arab and Muslim nations," Mr. Zuhri said. "It will create the impression there is a Western war against the Islamic world."

In the case of Sudan, Mr. bin Laden sought to portray talk of bringing in peacekeeping troops as another attempt by the United States to divide Arab lands and to impose a foreign military on an Islamic country.

"I call on mujahedeen and their supporters, especially in Sudan and the Arab peninsula, to prepare for a long war against the crusader plunderers in western Sudan," Mr. bin Laden said. "Our goal is not defending the Khartoum government but to defend Islam, its land and its people."

In the audiotape three months ago, Mr. bin Laden suggested that there could be peace between the West and Al Qaeda. But that notion was absent from this tape, replaced with a call to arms and what appeared to be a rationale for attacking civilians.

"They send their sons to armies to fight us and they continue their financial and moral support, while our countries are burned and our houses are bombed and our people are killed," he said.

Even before rising to international notoriety with the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, Mr. bin Laden had long sought to unite a culturally, politically and socially fragmented community of Muslims behind a common enemy: Israel and the West. With his most recent tape, analysts said that Mr. bin Laden held true to form, not only by embracing Hamas, but in particular by pointing to Sudan.

"He is using the hottest topics in the Arab world — Hamas, for example — he knows that the Arab street is very angry as America is cutting off Hamas aid, and he is using this issue to fuel the situation even further and incite young people to join his cause," said Muhammad Salah, Cairo bureau chief for the pan-Arab newspaper Al Hayat and an expert in Islamic extremism.

"What is new in this tape is the issue of Sudan," Mr. Salah added. "He had lived in Sudan and invested his money there and he knows that the Arab people and government are against international intervention in Sudan."

Experts in Islamic-related terrorism said the tape appeared intended as a finger in the eye to the White House, and a chance to use American foreign policy initiatives to support his notion that the United States is waging a war against Islam.

"He is asserting his presence," said Dina Rashwan, an expert on Islamic groups with the government-financed Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Egypt. "He is keen to show that he is aware of what's going on in the world. He is well informed so he is not isolated or hiding in some crack underground."

Michael Scheuer, former chief of the [Central Intelligence Agency's](#) bin Laden unit, said the segments of the tape he had read about suggested that Mr. bin Laden "is at the top of his game" largely because of America's own foreign policy. "We cut off Hamas after we had a fair election," he said. "It looks like we are going to intervene in another Muslim country with oil, in Sudan; we followed Israel's lead with Hamas. His most important ally is American foreign policy."

But while Mr. bin Laden's name still resonates around the world, it is not entirely clear that he can reclaim the mantle as the leader of the Qaeda terrorism network. And there has been no videotape seen of Mr. bin Laden since the last American presidential campaign.

"My initial impression is he is clutching at straws," said Michael Chandler, former head of the [United Nations](#) unit on counterterrorism. "If he really wants to show leadership, the way you show leadership is to show yourself. So why haven't we had a videotape?"

Mona el-Naggat contributed reporting from Cairo for this article, Elisabeth Bumiller from Palm Springs, Calif., and Greg Myre from Jerusalem.

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