

Cartoon, Pope rows lead bin Laden to target Europe

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Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden speaks at a news conference in Afghanistan in this May 26, 1998 file photo.
Credit: Reuters/Stringer/Files

(Reuters) - Osama bin Laden's latest message shows that he sees Europe as fertile soil for al Qaeda, especially at a time of tension between free speech and Muslim values, but is unlikely to signal an imminent attack.

WORLD

Security analysts and officials say there is no evidence that bin Laden's statements contain coded instructions to al Qaeda operatives and he has no track record of delivering warnings immediately before an attack.

But Wednesday's message was striking in its focus on Europe as opposed to the United States, whose President George W. Bush earned only a passing reference as "your oppressive ally who ... is about to depart the White House".

"Europe has become the battleground for al Qaeda ... It's a very clear statement of intent by bin Laden," said Sajjan Gohel of the Asia-Pacific Foundation, a security think-tank in London.

"Perhaps al Qaeda has recognized that sending a message to the United States is simply not worth it, it's not going to influence matters there. Perhaps it is a conscious effort to look at Europe again as the most exciting place to send its message," said Sebestyen Gorka, adjunct professor at the Marshall European Center for Security Studies in Germany.

Bin Laden sought to rekindle Muslim anger over Danish newspaper cartoons satirizing the Prophet Mohammad, which triggered violent international protests in 2006.

Demonstrations have flared again in Muslim countries since papers last month republished one of the most controversial drawings -- showing Mohammad with a bomb in his turban -- after Denmark arrested three men over a plot to kill the cartoonist.

"They're trying to stoke up tensions ... This is very much the al Qaeda doctrine of trying to reprise old grievances," Gohel said of Wednesday's message.

"NEW CRUSADE"

In the same vein, bin Laden renewed al Qaeda's verbal attacks on Pope Benedict, who angered Muslims in 2006 by quoting a 14th century Byzantine ruler who said the Prophet Mohammad had brought "things only evil and inhuman".

In the latest message, issued on the Prophet's birthday, bin Laden said the cartoons were "part of a new crusade in which the Pope of the Vatican had a significant role".

The reference was part of a familiar bin Laden strategy to paint Islam and Western, Christian-rooted societies as being in a state of war with its origins dating back to the Middle Ages.

"It's the logic of the crusade. The Pope, in the imagination of the Islamists, may appear as the head of the crusade, which is clearly absurd but may have meaning for some Muslims and the Islamists. I do think it may indicate the Pope is a target," said **Claude Moniquet, head of the European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center.**

He said the Pope's presence in Rome was one factor making Italy a target for al Qaeda. Other European countries in its sights included Denmark, because of the cartoons row, and the Netherlands, where right-wing politician Geert Wilders is set to release a video next week that is expected to condemn the Koran.

Bin Laden's message did not mention the Wilders film, but it did seek to demolish the free speech argument used by defenders of both the video and the cartoons.

If free speech is sacred, he said, then "on what basis do you suppress the freedom of those who cast doubt on the statistics of an historic event?" -- a reference to German and Austrian laws against denying the Holocaust.

Official reaction in Europe was muted on Thursday.

"We will continue our policy of not commenting on this kind of provocation," said Cristina Gallach, spokeswoman for European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana. Germany said it saw no change in the threat, while the Netherlands declined to comment.

"In the Netherlands it's taken seriously, but on the other hand it's nothing new," said Dutch security analyst Edwin Bakker. He said bin Laden was pouring oil on "fires that are already burning."

The Vatican rejected bin Laden's accusations as "totally unfounded".

Analysts said the message would be studied by intelligence agencies but would not prompt governments to tighten security further. "In the main target countries, we're already at a very high level," Brussels-based Moniquet said.

(Editing by [Peter Millership](#))