

ELEVEN QUESTIONS  
ABOUT THE OSAMA VIDEO

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## ELEVEN QUESTIONS ABOUT THE OSAMA VIDEO

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The much trumpeted Osama bin Laden video was at last released on Dec 13 after a lot of psychological fanfare and a plethora of pre-meditated and engineered comments to lend credence to it.

But after carefully seeing and listening to the video on the CNN for an hour one remains as confused, uninformed and unenlightened as ever before. It is like a road from nowhere to nowhere. There are various questions that must be probed before it can even be considered as a 'candidate for evidence'.

The first question relates to the quality of the video. It is amateurish, crude, hazy, and almost inaudible on critical points. Why was such a video made at all and for whose benefit? The suggestion that it was made for recruitment purposes is not even worth considering. The quality and content both belie this suggestion. Dialogues, facial expressions and lip-movements do not synchronize on a number of occasions which suggest some kind of tampering and doctoring. The tape has to be examined by experts to establish its worth and authenticity. On the face of it, this does not seem to be a genuine piece and serious doubts are being expressed about its authenticity.

The second question is about the timing of the videotape. Internal evidence and reference to Ramazan suggest that it was recorded in early Ramazan, with predictions of further events in the remaining part of Ramazan. The total absence of any drinks, snacks, qahwa, tea, dates etc, throughout the entire meeting excepting the very end is strange in view of the Arab customs. This also suggests that the recording took place in the month of Ramazan - no drinks throughout the meeting except at the end when iftar takes place.

If this is the case, then the fact that Ramazan began on November 16 while the video is reported to have been seen by President Bush (according to one report in the CNN programme on 'Cross Fire') in early November is fatal of its being recorded after September 11. The other report in 'The Independent' (December 14) suggests the video was recorded on November 9. That too is a week before Ramazan. In any case it could not but be an earlier video on which new conversation might have been super-imposed.

This would have to be examined scientifically and objectively, keeping in mind that modern technology has no problem with such doctoring.

Thirdly, the possibility of recording of such a damning confession on November 9 after over a month of bombing (that began on October 7) and no reference to that aggression on Afghanistan is impossible. Who would make that confession when the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif was imminent?

Fourthly, how could an interview/meeting taking place in Jalalabad on November 9 fail to capture the state of the war on that day? How could it be taped in that grim situation? How could it be found out before the fall of Jalalabad and reach the US in mid-November? Is this not a fatal blunder by those who concocted the story?

Fifthly, the question is if the video was available in November, then why was it released on December 13 after destroying Afghanistan and inducting American's nominated government on that country? It has been reported that it was found in some abandoned Osama bin Laden house. But till November 8, the Taliban had held the ground everywhere and even Mazar-i-Sharif fell only on November 10. How such a revealing/confessional video could have been found before November 3 when the offensive was restricted to air bombing and no ground operation had even taken place?

Sixthly, who is the other 'Sheikh' in the conversation? He is not from the al-Qaeda in Afghanistan as is clear from the conversation. If he came from Saudi Arabia and returned after the event, where is he now? His evidence is crucial and would be vital to establish the authenticity of the video. Can he be located in Saudi Arabia? Can he be called to substantiate the discussion? What effort has been made in this direction? From his looks, age, dress, manner of sitting and talking, he does not look like a 'Sheikh' at all. He gives the impression of being a 'student' or an Osama fan', not a Sheikh, who is supposed to be a tribal leader or a scholar. His statements are more obnoxious and intriguing - why can't he be located and called for evidence?

Seventhly, the transcript now published in 'The Independent' shows that the "Sheikh" is reported to have quoted a question from Sheikh Bahrani as follows: "How is Sheikh Bin Laden?" Now anyone familiar with Arab custom would know that an Arab would never address the other person he knows intimately by his surname as is in practice in the West. Bin Laden is not Osama's name - it is the family name. Every Arab would say "How is Sheikh Osama?" or even call him by his kunniyyah as father of so and so, but never as Bin Laden? This calls into question the authenticity of the whole conversation.

Eighthly, some of the quotations from the Quran and Hadith have been mixed up. These quotations are incomplete and even garbled. This is not expected of Osama or any Sheikh. Such amateurism is totally unexpected from those knowledgeable about the Islamic sources.

Ninthly, there is a reference to Egyptian TV showing women's jubilation on the WTC tragedy. There is no evidence that such a thing was even shown on Egyptian TV or any Arab TV channel. There was a clipping shown on CNN with reference to Palestinians in Gaza but none on any Egyptian or Arab channel. Even the one about Palestinians has been challenged (John Snow, presenter, BBC Channel 4 News) and is alleged to be a repeat of what happened on the occasion of the Gulf War. But the reference to Egyptian TV showing such jubilation exposes the miscarriage of the doctoring!

The tenth question is that the dialogue is spiced by reference to 'dreams' and 'visions' spread over a period of one year and coming from several persons, including a woman. This may be common to the 'Sufi way' or the Hollywood episodes, but is totally out of tune with the Salafi tradition to which Osama belongs. It is totally at odds with the intellectual culture of the persons involved. Whatever material is available about Osama bin Laden and his people, this is incongruous with their mode of thought and expression. Prima facie this seems to be something transplanted to give it mystical religious credence.

And finally, the expression of appreciation or otherwise after an event - however reprehensible or disgusting - is no proof of involvement in or engineering of the activity. The leaders of American Evangelical Right like Pat Buchanan and others are on record putting a particular gloss over the September 11 events. Such reactions, even if so expressed, do not constitute a conclusive proof of planning and participation.

These and other concerns make the alleged evidence from this video highly improbable. And it is a maxim of law that the benefit of the doubt, wherever it exists, goes to the accused and not the accuser.

As far as the mainstream of the Muslims is concerned, they have no reservation that if Osama bin Laden and his group is responsible for the events of September 11, they should be punished. But their guilt must be properly established first and this must be done with due course of law. You cannot be accuser, prosecutor, judge and executioner - all in one. Instead of adopting the just course of bringing Osama or whoever is responsible for this crime, to the judicial process, preferably under an international arrangement, as is being done for the war criminal Yugoslavian president Milosevic, the US has opted for an equally criminal path of revenge and its own terrorism - and that too not merely against the alleged suspects but against a whole country, its government and people, which has led to the destruction of the country and massacre of thousands of innocent people.

All human beings are equal and the lives of poor brown Afghans are as precious as the lives of rich white Americans. Even a just cause does not entitle an Osama bin Laden or a George Bush to spill innocents' blood. And that is the crime which is being committed with impunity. That is our real concern, for as the Quran says: killing of even one innocent person is like killing the entire human race.

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