



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

# CTC SENTINEL

OBJECTIVE . RELEVANT . RIGOROUS

## Contents

### FEATURE ARTICLE

- 1 The Abbottabad Documents:  
Bin Ladin's Security Measures**  
By Liam Collins

### REPORTS

- 4 The Evidence of Jihadist Activity  
in Syria**  
By Brian Fishman
- 10 The Arab Spring and its Influence  
on Al-Qa`ida**  
By Bruce Hoffman
- 12 Are Jihadist Groups Shifting Their Focus  
from the Far Enemy?**  
By Philip Mudd
- 15 The Abbottabad Documents:  
Bin Ladin's Cautious Strategy in Yemen**  
By Gabriel Koehler-Derrick
- 19 The Abbottabad Documents:  
The Quiet Ascent of Adam Gadahn**  
By Brian Dodwell
- 22 The Threat from Swarm Attacks:  
Case Studies from the North Caucasus**  
By Cerwyn Moore

- 26 Recent Highlights in Terrorist Activity**  
**28 CTC Sentinel Staff & Contacts**

## About the CTC Sentinel

The Combating Terrorism Center is an independent educational and research institution based in the Department of Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy, West Point. The CTC Sentinel harnesses the Center's global network of scholars and practitioners to understand and confront contemporary threats posed by terrorism and other forms of political violence.

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# The Abbottabad Documents: Bin Ladin's Security Measures

By Liam Collins



Pakistani security personnel watch as Usama bin Ladin's Abbottabad compound is destroyed. - Aamir Qureshi/AFP/Getty Images

**W**ITHIN A MERE week of his death, Usama bin Ladin asserted that “reality has proven that American technology and its sophisticated systems cannot arrest a mujahid if he does not commit a security error.”<sup>1</sup> Although Bin Ladin witnessed numerous senior al-Qa`ida members killed or captured by the United States and its coalition partners over the years, his words suggest that he attributed these losses not to superior U.S. technology, but to error or

carelessness on the part of individuals. He was of the view that adhering to “the required security precautions [for people] in our situation” is feasible and human error is avoidable if the mujahid is “conscious of the importance of the mission he is fulfilling and is capable of staying in hiding until the situation opens up.”<sup>2</sup>

Notwithstanding the limited number of recently released documents captured during the Abbottabad raid, they shed some light on the operational security (OPSEC) measures that Bin Ladin followed and urged others to follow to evade detection by the United States. Letters authored by Bin Ladin, assessed

<sup>1</sup> Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000010, p. 8. The pages of the documents received by the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) are not all numbered in the original Arabic version. The English translation numbers the pages to correspond to the content of each page of the Arabic version. To avoid confusion, this article refers to the page number in the Arabic version so that the reader can easily find it in the English translation. All of the Harmony documents can be found at the website for the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. The quality of the English translation provided to the CTC is not adequate throughout. When the translation was deemed inadequate, quotations cited in this article have either been amended or translated anew by Muhammad al-Ubaydi at the CTC.

to have been composed between late 2010 and early 2011, reveal that he was preoccupied with OPSEC measures.<sup>3</sup> His letters portray a man with a strategic vision, favoring patience over rashness and prioritizing the long-term safety of his operatives over the short-term gains of actions that might jeopardize security. Indeed, Bin Ladin was interested in winning the “long war,” not merely the irregular small battles.<sup>4</sup>

This article examines Bin Ladin’s concerns with signals intelligence (SIGINT), imagery intelligence (IMINT) and human intelligence (HUMINT). It also discusses the operational security measures that he implemented or attempted to implement to counter U.S. collection capabilities. Finally, it assesses the impact that these security measures likely had on al-Qa`ida’s ability to conduct operational acts.

#### Beware Everything

Usama bin Ladin was clearly OPSEC savvy or he would not have evaded the United States for close to a decade after the 9/11 attacks. His letters provide some insight into the range of considerations and calculations he made: he avoided using the phone and e-mail; he was concerned with technical surveillance such as aerial photography, satellites, and “chips”; and he was concerned with human threats to include “traitors,” Iranian and Pakistani intelligence, and even locals. Given that Bin Ladin lost many senior al-Qa`ida leaders over the past decade but was incapable of knowing exactly how they were detected, his concern was clearly justified.

Bin Ladin was especially alarmed by aerial photography. On several occasions he described a part of Waziristan as the “area within the perimeter of American aerial photography.”<sup>5</sup> He believed that “the Americans have great accumulative experience in photography due to the fact that they have been doing it in the area for so many years. They can

distinguish between houses frequented by men at a higher rate than usual.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, he recommended against meeting hostage negotiators in areas of Waziristan within the perimeter of U.S. aerial photography. When discussing the movement of his son Hamza, he told Shaykh Mahmud (who has been identified as Abu `Abd al-Rahman, or `Atiyya) that “[Hamza] should move only when the clouds are heavy.”<sup>7</sup> Additionally, given all the surveillance in Waziristan he stressed the importance to move the “brothers” occupying leadership positions out of Waziristan and “away from aircraft photography and bombardment.”<sup>8</sup>

Another concern for Bin Ladin was the potential for tracking devices to be embedded in even the smallest of items. For al-Qa`ida members who were being released from Iran, he advised that “they read the letter before they go in order to alert them to some security precautions including not bringing with them any of the things that they had in Iran, such as their luggage.”<sup>9</sup> In another letter he advised that “you should also get rid of the bag that the money was in because it might have a chip.”<sup>10</sup>

There is little in the documents about avoiding the phone or e-mail. In the seven letters, he made a single reference to a phone being monitored.<sup>11</sup> Given that these letters were written in 2010 and 2011 and all his communications appeared to be conducted by courier, it is reasonable to assume that everyone with whom he was corresponding was already aware of these risks and thus there was no need to address it explicitly.

In addition to SIGINT, Bin Ladin was concerned about HUMINT. It is clear that he worried not only about “spies,” but also about Iranian and Pakistani intelligence, and locals in general. When advising that the “brothers” leave Waziristan, he recommended that they should go to Afghanistan’s Kunar Province because of “its rougher terrain; too many mountains, rivers, and

trees that can accommodate hundreds of brothers without being spotted by the enemy [aircraft],” but continued to caution that it would not protect them from “spies.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, while his more immediate concern was aircraft, he made it clear that nowhere was safe from spies.

He also warned against possible infiltrations by Iranian intelligence: “since the Iranians are not to be trusted, then it is possible that they may plant chips in some of the released people’s

### “Bin Ladin devised what may be termed as the ‘art of clandestine courier delivery.’”

belongings.”<sup>13</sup> He expressed similar concerns about Pakistani intelligence and provided specific guidance on how to avoid drawing their attention during movement.<sup>14</sup> When providing guidance on how to meet with journalists, he warned that they may be “involuntarily monitored.”<sup>15</sup> Finally, realizing that any meeting or chance encounter increased the risk of compromise, he advised that “you arrange homes for them on the outskirts of the city, to distance them from the people, which reduces the security dangers.”<sup>16</sup>

#### Bin Ladin’s OPSEC Guidance

Given these concerns, Bin Ladin employed various security measures to minimize the risk of detection. He relied on couriers for all his correspondence, directing Shaykh Mahmud in one letter to “remind your deputies that all communication with others should be done through letters.”<sup>17</sup> Letters were then hand carried on electronic

3 Many of the letters are unsigned, so it is difficult to assess with certainty the author’s identify in each letter, but with reasonable confidence it can be assessed that six of the letters were written by Bin Ladin and a seventh is likely authored by either Bin Ladin or `Atiyya.

4 Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000019, p. 4.

5 Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000015, p. 6.

6 Ibid., p. 3.

7 Ibid., pp. 4-6.

8 Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000019, p. 30.

9 Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000015, p. 4.

10 Ibid., p. 6.

11 Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000019, p. 41.

12 Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000015, p. 2.

13 Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000019, p. 42.

14 Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000015, p. 4; Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000016, p. 4; Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000019, p. 41. Also see Nelly Lahoud et al., *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined?* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2012).

15 Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000019, pp. 37-38.

16 Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000010, p. 8.

17 Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000015, p. 3.

storage devices, and when messages were delivered to the media they were to be saved on a “new [memory] card with nothing else on it” to prevent the media or intelligence officials from exploiting other files that might be on the storage device.<sup>18</sup> Bin Ladin must have assessed that the risk of couriers being compromised was far less than that of e-mail and phone correspondence. Meetings were to be avoided and “in general [activities] should be arranged through correspondence.”<sup>19</sup>

Bin Ladin devised what may be termed as the “art of clandestine courier delivery.” It started with Bin Ladin saving his letters or media statements on some sort of electronic storage device (such as a thumb drive or a memory card) before handing it to his courier who picked it up from his residence. His courier would then meet the courier of the intended recipient in a tunnel or at a “roofed section of a market,” preferably on an overcast day to avoid U.S. surveillance.<sup>20</sup> The electronic media would then be handed to the recipient’s courier who would, in turn, hand carry the message/electronic device to the intended recipient.

Bin Ladin provided clear guidance that each leader should not have more than one or two couriers and that each courier should meet with his counterpart no more than twice a week.<sup>21</sup> To minimize the likelihood of someone providing the locations to the United States or its allies, Bin Ladin stated that leaders “should know the locations of the brothers, but they should not know your locations, except for the carriers”<sup>22</sup> and that this applied to “every *amir*.”<sup>23</sup> Finally, it was not uncommon for the recipient to be directed to delete the message after reading it.<sup>24</sup>

Bin Ladin was prudent enough to realize that some individuals were clearly not capable of following OPSEC measures and these individuals were a risk to themselves as well as to the organization. In one document, he advised that “there is a percentage of people who cannot do

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this, and those need to be handled in a different manner than others, and it may be better to provide them with an opportunity in the field.”<sup>25</sup> Effectively, he recommended that individuals who pose a security risk to the organization go to fight in Afghanistan where the risk of a security blunder was less of a concern.

To reinforce the importance of practicing good OPSEC, he directed Shaykh Mahmud to “get an oath from the brothers that would include: 1) to hear and obey and conduct jihad to bring back the caliphate; 2) protect operational secrets; 3) protect the work [for which the brother] is responsible,

card contains a phone number of one of our brothers contained in the message for Hamza, so please do not copy the message for Hamza, and after Hamza copies the phone number on paper, destroy the [memory] card for fear of compromise.”

In the same letter, Bin Ladin said that “one of the most important security issues in the cities is controlling children. [The children] should not get out of the house except for extreme necessity like medical care, [we should] make sure to teach them the local language, and they should not get to the yard of the house without an adult who will control the volume of their voices. We, with the grace of Allah, have been adhering to these precautions for nine years. And I haven’t heard that any of the brothers were arrested after the events while adhering to these precautions. Based on that, I would like you to inform the brothers that I think that anyone who can [not] adhere to the previous precautions should get out.”

and provide advice to the leadership.”<sup>26</sup> It is notable that one and a half of the points were dedicated to OPSEC measures and only a single point to ideology. Bin Ladin recognized that having ideologically committed members is of no use if they do not live long enough to act. Additionally, Bin Ladin directed Shaykh Mahmud to “take the oath even from brothers who gave it in the past,” ensuring as part of their reaffirmation of loyalty that each brother understood the critical nature of security measures.<sup>27</sup>

#### Operational Work

Bin Ladin clearly recognized that practicing good operational security slowed al-Qa`ida’s ability to act, but he calculated that it was a necessary trade-off. This caution applied not only to communications, but also to training and movement and is highlighted throughout his letters. In one letter, he stated “the other brother comes to you for necessary issues only, even if this slows down the work.”<sup>28</sup> In another he advised “that [Hamza] stays low...and postpones training to another opportunity.”<sup>29</sup> Later, in the same letter he stated that “you should know that arranging for a safe location after picking the suitable person takes time.”<sup>30</sup>

Courier exchanges are inherently slow and an extremely inefficient way to communicate. Based on the limited number of letters that are currently declassified, it is difficult to determine how long this correspondence took. Even if located in the same region of Pakistan, it would likely take at least a week to send a message and receive a response as Bin Ladin gave clear guidance that “the [courier] should visit you no more than twice a week.”<sup>31</sup>

18 Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000010, p. 3.

19 Ibid., p. 9.

20 Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000015, p. 4;

Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000019, pp. 38-42.

21 Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000015, pp. 2-3.

22 Ibid., p. 3.

23 Ibid.

24 In Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000019, p. 40, when discussing an enclosed message for Shaykh Yunis, he wrote that it should be destroyed if it cannot be delivered securely. In Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000010, p. 7, he stated, “This [memory]

25 Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000010, p. 8.

In the same letter, Bin Ladin said that “one of the most important security issues in the cities is controlling children. [The children] should not get out of the house except for extreme necessity like medical care, [we should] make sure to teach them the local language, and they should not get to the yard of the house without an adult who will control the volume of their voices. We, with the grace of Allah, have been adhering to these precautions for nine years. And I haven’t heard that any of the brothers were arrested after the events while adhering to these precautions. Based on that, I would like you to inform the brothers that I think that anyone who can [not] adhere to the previous precautions should get out.”

26 Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-000003, pp. 1-2; Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000015, pp. 3-4.

27 Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000015, p. 4.

28 Ibid., p. 3.

29 Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000010, p. 7.

30 Ibid., p. 9.

31 Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000015, p. 2.



Although the organization lost leaders who had to be replaced in a timely manner, Bin Ladin still required background checks on operatives, even if this slowed operational planning.<sup>32</sup> Further slowing the process, Bin Ladin insisted on personally approving the appointment of senior members. In one letter he directed Shaykh Mahmud to “send me the names of some qualified brothers, one of whom will become your deputy,” implying that only Bin Ladin had the prerogative to make such appointments.<sup>33</sup>

Notwithstanding the significant intelligence effort focused on him after 9/11, Bin Ladin’s compliance with strict security measures enabled him to evade detection for close to a decade. In the end, however, the United States was able to locate him, and during that time al-Qa`ida was incapable of mounting a significant attack against the United States.

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## The Evidence of Jihadist Activity in Syria

By Brian Fishman

AS THE UNITED NATIONS prepares to expand its observer mission in Syria and the world community debates what that mission should aim to achieve, there is a parallel conversation taking place in the global jihadist community. Reflecting their position in other Arab Spring revolutions, the jihadists are vociferous in their demands that Bashar al-Assad’s regime be overthrown. In contrast to the situation in other Arab Spring revolutions, in Syria jihadists linked to al-Qa`ida seem to have a militarily relevant capability on the ground. Proof of jihadist capability is elusive, but the combined weight of five indicators suggests that there is an active jihadist element operating on the ground in Syria. Its existence should be acknowledged for policy planning purposes.

First, a jihadist organization called Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) has been publicly declared in Syria and adopted al-Qa`ida-like tactics and modes of distributing propaganda.

Second, al-Qa`ida’s *amir*, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has called for violence in Syria and jihadist intellectual leaders have echoed his message.

Third, important non-jihadist, Arab voices advocate privatized action to overthrow the al-Assad regime and have framed the struggle as opposition to “occupation,” discourse that jihadists believe substantiates their calls for violent jihad, not just localized resistance to a corrupt government.

Fourth, there are already credible reports of foreign fighters attempting to infiltrate Syria, including a number reportedly affiliated with jihadist movements.

Fifth, al-Qa`ida has an active affiliate in neighboring Iraq that has longstanding logistical capabilities in Syria.

This confluence of factors suggesting that jihadists, and perhaps al-Qa`ida specifically, have the intent and capability to operate in the Syrian rebellion are unique among revolutionary Arab Spring states, but they do not mean that jihadists are likely to dominate the rebellion there. As in most conflicts where they operate, true jihadists almost certainly represent a small percentage of combatants in Syria and are unlikely to seize political control.

There is internal disagreement among jihadists about how to approach the conflict in Syria. Despite general consensus that supporting the uprising in Syria is a religious obligation, jihadists disagree over whether that assistance must go only to the small jihadist JN or if it can be provided to the ideologically compromised (from the jihadist point of view), but more powerful collection of militants known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA). They also disagree over whether jihadists have an obligation to travel to Syria to fight or should simply offer material support. These disagreements speak to the weakness of jihadists in the Syrian conflict versus the FSA, but also suggest that the violent jihadist cadre in Syria will turn on the FSA and other Syrian nationalists should the al-Assad regime fall.

The presence of jihadists worsens the situation in Syria: it is likely to both bolster the Syrian regime politically and keep the opposition divided. The presence of a jihadist element in the rebellion, however, should not be the conclusive factor determining whether the United States offers stronger political or materiel support to the rebellion. Al-Qa`ida and its allies are leeches on a more fundamental conflict in Syria—as they are in most regions where al-Qa`ida affiliates operate—and U.S. policy should be structured primarily to address those dynamics and the broader regional and geopolitical factors at play, especially the influence of Iran.

<sup>32</sup> Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000016, p. 5. Additionally, he emphasized the importance of security when looking for the ideal traits in Harmony Document SOCOM-20012-0000019, p. 40: “and that he should be secretive even from his family and close friends, well-mannered, quiet, patient, aware, knowledgeable of the enemy tricks, and able to stay away from his family if that becomes risky.”

<sup>33</sup> Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000019, p. 31.