

By Scott Stewart

A new video from al Qaeda's media arm, As-Sahab, became available on the Internet on June 2. The video was 100 minutes long, distributed in two parts and titled "Responsible Only for Yourself." As the name suggests, this video was the al Qaeda core's latest attempt to encourage grassroots jihadists to undertake lone-wolf operations in the West, a recurrent theme in jihadist messages since late 2009.

The video, which was well-produced and contained a number of graphics and special effects, features historical footage of a number of militant Islamist personalities, including Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abdullah Azzam and Abu Yahya al-Libi.

In addition to al-Libi, who is considered a prominent al Qaeda ideological authority, the video also features an extensive discourse from another Libyan theologian, Sheikh Jamal Ibrahim Shtaiwi al-Misrati. Al-Misrati (who is from Misurata, as one can surmise from his name) was also featured in a March 25 As-Sahab message encouraging jihadists in Libya to assume control of the country and place it under Shariah once the Gadhafi regime is overthrown. The still photo used over the March message featuring al-Misrati was taken from the video used in the June 2 message, indicating that the recently released video of al-Misrati was shot prior to March 25. The video also contains a short excerpt of a previously released Arabic language Al-Malahim media video by Anwar al-Awlaki and an English-language statement by Adam Gadahn that is broken up into small segments and appears periodically throughout the video.

Despite the fact that many of the video segments used to produce this product are quite dated, there is a reference to bin Laden as a shaheed, or martyr, so this video was obviously produced after his death.

Unlike the As-Sahab message on the same topic featuring Adam Gadahn released in March 2010 and the English-language efforts of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's "Inspire" magazine, this video is primarily in Arabic, indicating that it is intended to influence an Arabic-speaking audience.

To date, much of the media coverage pertaining to the release of this video has focused on one short English-language segment in which Adam Gadahn encourages Muslims in the United States to go to gun shows and obtain automatic weapons to use in shooting attacks. This focus is understandable given the contentiousness of the gun-control issue in the United States, but a careful examination of the video reveals far more than just fodder for the U.S. gun-control debate.

Contents of the Video

The first 36 minutes of the video essentially comprise a history lesson of militants who heard the call to jihad and then acted on it. Among the examples

are individuals such as ElSayyid Nosair, the assassin of Jewish Defense League founder Meir Kahane; Abdel Basit (also known as Ramzi Yousef), the operational planner of the 1993 World Trade Center attack and the thwarted Bojinka plot; Mohammed Bouyeri, the assassin of Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh; and Fort Hood shooter Nidal Malik Hasan. Others include the leader of the team of assassins who killed Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and the militants behind the Mumbai attacks.

Then, after listing those examples, the video emphasizes the point that if one is to live in the "real Islamic way," one must also follow the examples of the men profiled. Furthermore, since the "enemies of Islam" have expanded their "attacks against Islam" in many different places, the video asserts that it is not only in the land of the Muslims that the enemies of Islam must be attacked, but also in their homelands (i.e., the West). In fact, the video asserts that it is easy to strike the enemies of Islam in their home countries and doing so creates the biggest impact. And this is the context in which Gadhafi made his widely publicized comment about Muslims buying guns and conducting armed assaults.

Now, it is important to briefly address this comment by Gadhafi: While it is indeed quite easy for U.S. citizens to legally purchase a wide variety of firearms, it is illegal for them to purchase fully automatic weapons without first obtaining the proper firearms license. This fixation with obtaining fully automatic rifles instead of purchasing readily available and legal semi-automatic weapons has led to the downfall of a number of jihadist plots inside the United States, including one just last month in New York. Therefore, aspiring jihadists who would seek to follow Gadhafi's recommendations to the letter would almost certainly find themselves quickly brought to the attention of the authorities.

When we look at the rest of Gadhafi's comments in this video, it is clear the group is trying to convey a number of other interesting points. First, Gadhafi notes that jihadists wanting to undertake lone-wolf activities must take all possible measures to keep their plotting secret, and the first thing they should do is avail themselves of all the electronic manuals available on the Internet pertaining to security.

A few minutes later in the video, Gadhafi remarks on a point made in a segment from a U.S. news program that the Hollywood perception of the capabilities of the National Security Agency (NSA) is nowhere near what those capabilities are in real life and that, while the NSA and other Western intelligence agencies collect massive amounts of data, it is hard for them to link the pieces together to gain intelligence on a pending attack plan. This is true, and the difficulty of putting together disparate intelligence to complete the big picture is something STRATFOR has long discussed. Gadhafi notes that the downfall of most grassroots operations is loose lips and not the excellence of Western intelligence and urges aspiring grassroots jihadists to trust no one and to reveal their plans to no one, not even friends and family members. This claim is also true. Most thwarted grassroots plots have been uncovered due to poor operational security and sloppy tradecraft.

The video also contains lengthy theological discussions justifying the jihadist position that jihad is a compulsory, individual obligation for every able-bodied Muslim. As the video turns to the necessity of attacking the enemies of Islam in their homelands, Gadahn notes that Americans are people who crave comfort and security and that terrorist attacks scare them and take away their will to fight Muslims. According to Gadahn, terrorist attacks also cause the people to object to leaders who want to attack Islam, and the people will not vote for those leaders.

Throughout the video, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee is depicted several times, and it is asserted that the United States and the West are controlled by Jewish interests. Gadahn says that influential figures in the Zionist-controlled Western governments, industries and media should be attacked, and that such attacks will weaken the will of the masses to fight against Islam. He also says that attacks against such targets are not hard and that, from recent examples of people who have assaulted the pope and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, it is evident that if jihadists trust their efforts to Allah and choose the right place, time and method, they can succeed in their attacks.

But armed assaults are not the only type of attacks being advocated in the video. The message also contains several minutes of material dedicated to encouraging cyber-jihadists to conduct electronic attacks against the United States. This concept was supported by several excerpts from a segment of the U.S. television program 60 Minutes pertaining to the cyber threat and featuring U.S. experts discussing their fears that terrorists would attack such targets as the electrical grid. Again, this is an old threat, and acquiring the skills to become a world-class hacker takes time, talent and practice. This means that, in practical terms, the threat posed by such attacks is no greater than it was prior to the release of this video.

Tactical Implications

First, it needs to be recognized that this video does not present any sort of new threat. As far as Gadahn's pleas for American Muslims to buy firearms and conduct armed assaults, we wrote an analysis in May 2010 discussing many failed jihadist bomb plots and forecasting that the jihadists would shift to armed assaults instead. Furthermore, jihadist websites have long been urging their followers to become cyber-jihadists and to create viruses that would cripple the economies of the United States and the West, which are so dependent on computerized systems.

Even the calls to target industrial and media leaders are not new. Jihadist publications such as the now-defunct online magazine of al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia, Maaskar al-Battaar, encouraged attacks against such targets as far back as 2004.

This means that this latest As-Sahab message merely echoes threats that have already existed for some time now, such as threats emanating from grassroots jihadists. The grassroots threat is real and must be guarded against, but it is not nearly as acute as the threat posed by other, more skillful terrorist actors. Grassroots operatives do not often possess good terrorist tradecraft, and their attacks tend to be poorly planned and executed and susceptible to

discovery and disruption.

However, killing people is not difficult, and even amateurs can be deadly. As we examine these repeated pleas by al Qaeda for grassroots jihadists to conduct attacks in the West, and then consider the ease with which such attacks can be conducted — evidenced by Hasan's actions at Fort Hood — it raises an interesting question: Why haven't we seen more of these attacks?

Certainly we've seen some thwarted attempts like the previously mentioned plot in New York in May 2011 and a successful attack in March on U.S. Air Force personnel in Frankfurt, Germany, but overall, the jihadist message urging Muslims to take up arms and conduct attacks simply does not appear to be gaining much traction among Muslims in the West — and the United States in particular. We have simply not seen the groundswell of grassroots attacks that was initially anticipated. The pleas of Gadahn and his companions appear to be falling upon deaf ears and do not seem to resonate with Muslims in the West in the same way that the cries of the pro-democracy movements in the Middle East have in recent months.

In theory, these grassroots efforts are supposed to supplement the efforts of al Qaeda to attack the West. But in practice, al Qaeda and its franchise groups have been rendered transnationally impotent in large part by the counterterrorism efforts of the United States and its allies since 9/11. Jihadist groups been able to conduct attacks in the regions where they are based, but grassroots operatives have been forced to shoulder the bulk of the effort to attack the West. In fact, the only successful attacks conducted inside the United States since 9/11 have been conducted by grassroots operatives, and in any case, grassroots plots and attacks have been quite infrequent. Despite the ease of conducting such attacks, they have been nowhere near as common as jihadist leaders hoped — and American security officials feared.

One reason for this paucity of attacks may be the jihadist message being sent. In earlier days, the message of Islamist militants like Abdullah Azzam was "Come, join the caravan." This message suggested that militants who answered the call would be trained, equipped and put into the field of battle under competent commanders. It was a message of strength and confidence — and a message that stands in stark contrast to As-Sahab's current message of "Don't come and join us, it is too dangerous — conduct attacks on your own instead." The very call to leaderless resistance is an admission of defeat and an indication that the jihadists might not be receiving the divine blessing they claim.

| www.STRATFOR.com All rights reserved Reproduced with permission