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Tapes Offer a Look Beneath the Surface of bin Laden and Al Qaeda

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR

A large cache of audio tapes left behind at [Osama bin Laden's](#) headquarters in Kandahar, [Afghanistan](#), in 2001 was released Wednesday, offering a portrait of his gradual transformation from Saudi militant to global threat and opening a window on the daily lives of men recruited for jihad.

While Mr. bin Laden's evolution from opposing Saudi Arabia's ruling dynasty to running an international terrorist organization has been detailed before, said Flagg Miller, an assistant professor at the University of California, Davis, who spent five years translating the tapes, the recordings provide a more spontaneous look at [Al Qaeda](#) than what is available through the carefully choreographed messages it releases.

"These are back-room conversations of Al Qaeda's key operatives as well as fresh or potential recruits who are trying to figure out what the heck is going on and what their role in it is," Mr. Miller said.

On one tape, a dull roar growing louder stumped Mr. Miller. Finally he discovered it was the sound of a gas stove being used by low-level recruits cooking breakfast with a famous Egyptian-born cleric, [Abu Hamza al-Masri](#), now in a British prison fighting extradition to the United States on terrorism charges. The cleric tried to inspire them by comparing frying eggs to fighting jihad.

"These small moments tell us what the core of being on jihad was like," said Mr. Miller, who teaches religious studies. "It is boring. While they are waiting, they create ways to make jihad urgent and imminent, so they develop this fanciful narrative comparing breakfast to going out on a raid."

Mr. Miller released his findings in Davis, Calif., with a more complete explanation scheduled to be published in the October edition of the *Journal of Language and Communication*.

Though Mr. bin Laden's general biography has been studied, experts said, ample room exists for a more detailed portrait of his success as a recruiter.

"One of the reasons that we are in the fix that we are in at the moment is because we haven't taken the measure of the man," said Michael Scheuer, who left the [C.I.A.](#) in 2004 and while there worked in the special unit that focused on Mr. bin Laden. "The U.S. government sees him as a nihilistic gangster, so they are not interested in finding out that he has any kind of talent."

Mr. Scheuer said that while he was at the C.I.A. he knew of only one recording of Mr. bin Laden from the 1980s. Mr. Miller worked on three.

Farhana Ali, a terrorism expert at the RAND Corporation who has spent years studying Mr. bin Laden's statements, said Al Qaeda's propaganda recordings had been well-documented since 2001. That included scrutinizing Mr. bin Laden's use of tribal poetry, Koranic references and mystical allusions.

Experts said they would have to see Mr. Miller's work before concluding how much was new. But they said past translation work had typically put priority on national security threats, like whether the tapes revealed anything about Mr. bin Laden's whereabouts.

The tapes of speeches, sermons and lectures, numbering more than 1,500, were discovered by CNN in Afghanistan in 2001. They eventually ended up at Williams College and then [Yale](#). They included hundreds of sermons by Islamic scholars, many of them radical, as well as recordings of the give and take of training discussions.

The cache included at least 20 tapes of Mr. bin Laden speaking, although it is not clear where or when all of them were made. The first of them start around 1988 and the last are from 2000. They were found after Al Qaeda's leadership fled its Kandahar headquarters first for Tora Bora and then for parts not entirely known. One taped lecture, which was not by Mr. bin Laden, roots the idea of establishing flexible border redoubts like Tora Bora in Islamic philosophy.

The tapes of Mr. bin Laden speaking break down into three distinctive periods. In the late 1980s, he was recruiting for the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan, tailoring his standard stump speech for hometown audiences all around his native Saudi Arabia.

By the mid-1990s, that changed. The Soviets had withdrawn from Afghanistan and Mr. bin Laden shifted focus to the American presence in the Persian Gulf as an affront to Muslims. He told a parable from the Koran chapter called "The Elephants," when an Abyssinian Christian army tried to capture what is now the holy Kaaba shrine in Mecca using the best war technology of the era.

The Arabs defeated the invaders through sheer tenacity and a miracle: birds panicked the elephants by dropping stones from their beaks. To Mr. bin Laden, the episode exemplified Arab tribes uniting against a common enemy. "It was a time of chivalry and honor and generosity and manliness and the apex of tribalism," Mr. Miller said, even if Islam had not yet arrived.

By 1999, the emphasis on religious texts and tribal poetry was minimized, replaced by a fervent pitch to fight the United States. The number of American troops stationed in the Middle East was detailed as a "chicken" count. At this point his lectures were given official titles, like "The Presence of the Crusader Jewish Occupation in the Heart of the Islamic World."

Mr. bin Laden is noted as a stickler for Arabic grammar and rhetorical flourishes. One tape by a nonnative speaker butchering the language seemed to reflect his prejudices. Mr. Miller said it was marked "gheir saleh," Arabic for "unpleasant."

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