

Al-Zawahiri Interviewed on Fighting in Afghanistan, Bin Ladin, Others

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Telephone Interview with Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Usama Bin Ladin's right-hand man and leader of Egypt's Jihad Organization, by Farraj Isma'il from Chaman on the Afghan border; date not given

(FBIS Translated Text) There are conflicting reports about the fate of Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Usama Bin Ladin's right-hand man and leader of the Egyptian Jihad Organization. It is known that Al-Zawahiri has avoided direct media appearances ever since his launch of the Jihad cases in Egypt and his association with Bin Ladin, especially after the 11 September events. Despite the conflicting reports that he was injured, Al-Zawahiri stayed away from the spotlights without anyone knowing his real position, the role he is playing, or the truth about his injury.

In these atmospheres, Al-Majallah succeeded in contacting him and reported this in its previous issue under the headline "Bin Ladin's Closest Companion." That companion was Al-Zawahiri.

We spoke to him directly but he preferred then not to have his name mentioned in the interview. For this issue, Al-Majallah was eager to contact him again through a mediator who is one of his and Bin Ladin's companions so as to learn about the latest developments in Al-Qa'ida and its leadership and whether it was planning for war or capitulation. Al-Majallah insisted this time that the interview should be published directly under Al-Zawahiri's name. The agreement followed naturally due to Al-Zawahiri's desire to assert his presence on the stage. Following is the text of the interview:

(Isma'il) Are you now encircled inside the Tora Bora Mountains?

(Al-Zawahiri) This is just one of our positions but not our headquarters. We are at present leading guerilla warfare all over Afghanistan, including the northern provinces and the mountains overlooking Kabul.

(Isma'il) Can we offer our condolences to you on the death of your family?

(Al-Zawahiri) They are well.

(Isma'il) Where are the whereabouts of your family and the Arab fighters' families?

(Al-Zawahiri) They are alive. Many of the families of the Arab and other fighters are still in Kabul, Jalalabad, Kandahar, and other main Afghan cities. We take it for granted that they are civilians and that no one will harm women and children. But some women were subjected to barbaric rape in Kabul and Jalalabad and this behavior is alien to the nature of the Afghan people who are known for their purity and commitment to their creed. But the bribes and the desire for money tempted the weak-willed to sell their souls to the devil in all Afghanistan.

(Isma'il) Where are you now?

(Al-Zawahiri) I might be in Kabul, Kandahar, Jalalabad, Zabol, or Helmand, and probably all over Afghanistan. The real war has started and we are waging a war of attack and retreat and we

will inflict heavy losses on the Americans. Suicidal operations are going to be one of our effective means.

(Isma'il) Have these operations started?

(Al-Zawahiri) We achieved brilliant military victories in the past days through the suicidal operations. One of them involved one of our men blowing up a Northern Alliance helicopter over the Farkhar (as transliterated) area near Taloqan, the provincial capital of Takhar.

Twenty members of the highly trained Special Forces were killed in the operation, including three important Alliance commanders. One of them was Mohammad Mustafa who was the commander of Leader Ahmad Shah Mas'ud's personal guard and later commanded one of the factions that fought our forces in Mazar-e Sharif and carried out several bloody massacres against the population there.

(Isma'il) Who carried out this operation?

(Al-Zawahiri) He was a member of the forces encircled in Konduz that pretended to surrender and collaborate with the enemy. He is Arbab Mohammad Hashim.

A British Muslim woman called Umm-Hafsah carried out another operation during which she killed two Americans. She was with her husband and brother in the forces that were also besieged in Konduz.

Umm-Hafsah stayed with her brother Abdallah al-Walid in Konduz after the besieged forces left it. Her husband, an Arab, went with the forces that left the city safely. Umm-Hafsah and her brother were Jews who converted to Islam in Britain before they immigrated to Afghanistan and settled in it. But they still carried their original passports that were issued in their Jewish names.

Umm-Hafsah hid explosives under her clothes and she and her brother surrendered to the Shiite Hezb-e Wahdat-e (Eslami) and Abdol Rashid Dostum factions. When they spoke in English with these forces' vanguards, the latter thought they were Americans because of their European looks and they were taken in a vehicle to Mazar-e Sharif where US units were deployed. They claimed there that they were working for Oxfam relief agency inside Konduz province when the Taliban forces entered and took up positions in it after their withdrawal from Mazar-e Sharif. They were sent to the US forces' command center in Kabul to check their claims. They left in a vehicle and were heavily guarded by a unit that included four Hezb-e Wahdat-e men. They sat in the back seat and the two Americans sat in the vehicle's cabin. At the right moment, she kicked her brother with her foot to make him move away from her and then blew herself up as her brother leapt from the vehicle that was driving at high speed.

(Isma'il) Did Abdallah return to you?

(Al-Zawahiri) Abdallah is well and he came to us. He personally confirmed the death of all the passengers after the operation. He also saw the two Americans dead inside the cabin and removed their dog tags, which are now in the hands of our forces' command.

(Isma'il) What is written on these tags?

(Al-Zawahiri) They identify the two Americans. I challenge the Pentagon to deny this information. We have all their documents. The two Americans are Michael Simon Watkins from Los Angeles and Ronald Steven Leaf (as transliterated) from Houston. Their families must surely recognize their names.

(Isma'il) Are you making the caves your headquarters?

(Al-Zawahiri) We are not hiding in the caves and not avoiding the confrontation. Suicide is an aspiration and a gain that we seek. These statements from Afghan leaders who are seeking to get the largest amount of US bribes astonish us. Every one of them is claiming that Usama Bin Ladin is in his area so as to receive the US money. An example of this is what is happening in the Tora Bora village. There are people there who are after the millions that the United States has allocated for those who arrest us. They are like someone searching for a treasure and each one of them is entertaining the hope of being the winner. We then have the statements from the perfidious Afghan leaders claiming that we are in this area and that Usama Bin Ladin is leading his men in his last stronghold. You might know that they did not find anyone when they reached these caves where they said we were entrenched.

(Isma'il) Why did you surrender the cities all of a sudden?

(Al-Zawahiri) We planned for this stage and prepared ourselves for it before the start of the US offensive. The real war has started now. These cities will be catastrophic for those who are now making them bases for attacking us. What is happening now in Kabul and the northern provinces is proof of this. Our forces are still there and fighting organized guerilla warfare. For example, the Hamzah al-Zubayr Battalion is carrying out violent night attacks on Kabul. A unit from the battalion even succeeded in entering the center of the capital and carried out bombings against the forces of Northern Alliance Defense Minister Mohammad Fahim.

(Isma'il) How did the Pashtun tribes turn against you?

(Al-Zawahiri) We should not generalize. The majority of these tribes are with us and they uphold the Afghans' splendid Islamic traditions with which we have lived. They gave us support and protection. It is true to say that some elements were blinded by the greed for money. The United States is offering millions of dollars in bribes and rewards for anyone who brings it the head of Bin Ladin or one of his aides. We arrested two spies working for the US forces and they revealed the huge amounts of money that were paid to buy the Pashtun tribes so that they can locate the positions of the Arab fighters and Usama Bin Ladin. These tribes are not only in Afghanistan but in Pakistan too.

(Isma'il) Did you not realize before the war that you might become goods for sale?

(Al-Zawahiri) Yes and we included that in our plans. We realized that some Afghan elements, especially the tribes, might weaken before the money. Therefore we decided at a later stage to evacuate the cities and deploy in fortified and safe positions. We did this in agreement with Mullah Mohammad Omar, the prince of the faithful. There were no differences over this matter between us as some reports suggested. The man is a first class fighter and willing to sacrifice his life in defense of his creed.

(Isma'il) US spy satellites are watching you and monitoring your telephone calls. It is said that they have succeeded in pinpointing your location as they did when they hunted down Abu-Hafs al-Masri inside a building in Kabul.

(Al-Zawahiri) We are not surprised by such talk in this propaganda war that is trying to depict the US military machine as if it is invincible, watches everything, and knows everything that happens in the world. But what we see in the field disproves this. The evidence is that they are seeking information from Afghan commanders who have told them that we are in Tora Bora, we are entrenched in it, and it is our last stronghold. If they know everything, then they would not be attacking the mountains now.

(Isma'il) Where are you now?

(Al-Zawahiri) In all the cities and provinces that they thought they have seized.

(Isma'il) And where is Usama Bin Ladin?

(Al-Zawahiri) He is one of the fighters fighting in the field and not hiding in the caves as they think. I said in a previous interview that he personally led the Konduz battle and the Americans did not discover him despite all the resources they are talking about.

(Isma'il) Is it true that Mullah Mohammad Omar was captured by one of the commanders in Kandahar?

(Al-Zawahiri) These are baseless claims. An Afghan commander tried to claim this so as to receive US money.

(Isma'il) So how was the location of Abu-Hafs discovered and he was killed?

(Al-Zawahiri) Have they displayed his body? Do they have any proof?

They derived all their information from telephone calls, which they said they had monitored. I assert that Abu-Hafs is still fighting and has not been martyred yet.

(Isma'il) Where is Sulayman Abu-Ghayth who is described as your official spokesman?

(Al-Zawahiri) He too is at the forefront of the fighters. This does not mean however that we are all in one front or one place with Bin Ladin. Every one of us is fighting in his position and could be hundreds of kilometers from the others.

(Isma'il) But how can you continue the battle when you are besieged in the mountains?

(Al-Zawahiri) We have prepared for everything. I can say that Taliban is not finished and that the battle will continue. The enemy's losses are large but we do not have a media to bring the truth about our position and therefore the world thinks that we are reeling and that Taliban is finished and its state has disappeared.

(Isma'il) Do you think they know everything about you at present?

(Al-Zawahiri) They do not know anything, either about our conditions, positions, or the number of our fighters. It is difficult for them to know. They are relying on a tribal group they have bought with their money and this group will bleed them dry. We attacked some of them in Helmand and Nimruz provinces and killed more than 80 of them.

(Isma'il) They are saying you are planning to escape and that Usama Bin Ladin has left Afghanistan.

(Al-Zawahiri) We have pledged to fight until death. They are disseminating reports of escape in order to save their face. The military campaign has entered its third month without achieving its objectives.

(Isma'il) How, when the Taliban rule has indeed ended?

(Al-Zawahiri) The reality says that the Islamic emirate does not rule Afghanistan's cities and provinces. But this reality also says that it has been replaced by dozens of warring governments that are now fighting each other. You can see this in Kandahar that is under several competing factions. The situation is going to get worse and that is what we have expected.