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Al-Qaida deputy al-Zawahri criticizes Iran in new audiotape

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CAIRO, Egypt

Al-Qaida's top deputy in a new audiotape today accused Shiite Iran of spreading a conspiracy theory about who carried out the Sept. 11 attacks as a way to discredit the real power of the Sunni terror group.

Ayman al-Zawahri, al-Qaida's No. 2, has stepped up his denunciations of Iran in recent messages in part to depict the terror group as the Arabs' top defense against the Persian nation's rising power in the Middle East.

The increasing enmity toward Iran is a notable change of rhetoric from al-Zawahri, who in the past rarely mentioned the country -- apparently in a hopes that he would be able to forge some sort of understanding with Tehran based on their common rivalry with the United States. But Iran has long sought to distance itself from al-Qaida.

"Al-Zawahri wanted to work with Iran, but he's deeply disappointed that Iran has not cooperated with al-Qaida," said Rohan Gunaratna, a terror expert and author of "Inside al-Qaida: The Global Network of Terror."

So instead, al-Zawahri "wants to appeal to the anti-Shiite, anti-Iran sentiments in the Arab and Muslim world," said Gunaratna, head of the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research in Singapore.

Al-Zawahri appeared to aim in part to exploit widespread worry in the Arab world over Iran's influence, particularly in Iraq, to garner support for al-Qaida. At the same time, he sought to denigrate Iran's ally Hezbollah, which has gained some popularity even among Sunnis in the region for its fight against Israel.

Al-Zawahri's comments came in a two-hour audiotape posted on an Islamic militant Web site, the second message in weeks in which he answered hundreds of questions sent to the site by al-Qaida sympathizers.

The question-and-answer campaign is a sign of the terror group's sophistication in its use of the Web --



The advertisement features the Comcast logo at the top left, a television set showing a child on the right, and the text "Comcast Digital Cable with On Demand". Below this, it says "click here for restrictions and more information" and "Ask about a \$100 Gift Check when you sign up for an eligible Comcast Triple Play".

showing that it is not only able to post increasingly frequent messages from its leaders but also keep in touch with its popular base even as its leaders remain in hiding in the border region of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The Web is a key tool of al-Qaida's central leadership to inspire and direct sympathizers at a time when some terror experts question how much control they have over Islamic militants. Al-Qaida branches in Iraq and Afghanistan are believed to have close ties with the terror network's core, but its level of control elsewhere is little known.

The authenticity of the audio could not be independently confirmed. But the voice sounded like past audiotapes from the terror leader, and the posting where it was found bore the logo of Al-Sahab.

Al-Zawahri spoke on a wide range of topics in today's message as he addressed the questions. He told a female questioner that there were no women in the ranks of al-Qaida, but praised the wives of mujahedeen for their "heroic role in taking care of their homes and children amid the trials of exile."

Female suicide bombers have carried out numerous attacks in Iraq, some of them believed to be by al-Qaida's branch in the country, but al-Zawahri appeared to mean that no women were among the terror group's core leadership.

Al-Zawahri, who is Osama bin Laden's deputy, even addressed global warming, saying it showed "how criminal, brutal and greedy the Western Crusader world is, with America at the top."

He predicted that global warming would "would make the world more sympathetic to and understanding of the Muslims' jihad (holy war) against the aggressor America."

But in many of his answers, al-Zawahri went out of his way to criticize Iran. He said the Iraqi insurgent umbrella group led by al-Qaida, called the Islamic State of Iraq, is "the primary force opposing the Crusaders (the United States) and challenging Iranian ambitions" in Iraq.

One of the questioners asked about the theory that has circulated in the Middle East and elsewhere that Israel was behind the 2001 suicide airplane hijackings against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Al-Zawahri accused Hezbollah's Al-Manar television of starting the rumor. "The purpose of this lie is clear -- (to suggest) that there are no heroes among the Sunnis who can hurt America as no else did in history. Iranian media snapped up this lie and repeated it," he said.

"Iran's aim here is also clear -- to cover up its involvement with America in invading the homes of Muslims in Afghanistan and Iraq," he added. Iran cooperated with the United States in the 2001 U.S. assault on Afghanistan that toppled al-Qaida's allies, the Taliban.

Al-Qaida has previously claimed responsibility for the 9/11 attacks.

In an audiotape last week, al-Zawahri denounced what he called Iran's expansionist plans, saying Tehran aims to annex southern Iraq and Shiite areas of the eastern Arabian Peninsula and as well as strengthen ties to its followers in southern Lebanon. He warned that if Iran achieves its goals, it will "explode the situation in an already exploding region."

The rhetoric is a stark change for al-Zawahri, who in the past did not seek to exploit Shiite-Sunni tensions. When the former head of al-Qaida in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was waging a brutal campaign of suicide bombings against Shiites in Iraq before his death in 2006, al-Zawahri sent messages

to him telling him to stop, fearing it would hurt al-Qaida's image.

Gunaratna said the change in tone could be because of al-Qaida's failure to win the release of al-Qaida figures detained by Iran since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, including al-Qaida security chief Saif al-Adel and two of bin Laden's sons. Gunaratna said up to 200 al-Qaida figures and their families are under house arrest in Iran and that Tehran has rejected al-Qaida attempts to negotiate their release.

Al-Qaida currently doesn't have the strength to launch attacks in Iran, he said, but it intends to do so "in the future, if al-Qaida becomes strong in Iraq ... Iran believes al-Qaida in Iraq could become a major threat."

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