

# WebMemo



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## Bin Ladenism Lives, and So Probably Does Bin Laden

*James Phillips*

On September 23, the French newspaper *l'Est Republicain* reported, based on a leaked memo from France's DSGE intelligence agency, that Saudi intelligence had uncovered information that Osama bin Laden had died of typhoid on August 23 in Pakistan. But a French security official quickly cautioned that the report is based on a single source, and a Saudi intelligence source told UPI on September 23, "We do not confirm bin Laden's death. We don't know." For a variety of reasons, this report is likely false. But even if true, bin Laden's death will have little impact on America's prosecution of the war on terrorism.

### The Facts on the Ground

The reported details of bin Laden's death don't add up. Typhoid, for example, is easily cured with antibiotics, and even if untreated it is fatal in less than 20 percent of cases, according to the U.S. government's Center for Disease Control. And if Saudi intelligence officials did have information about bin Laden's death, they probably would pass it on to American intelligence officials. According to the report, that reportedly did not happen.

Considerable circumstantial evidence also indicates that bin Laden is still alive. No al-Qaeda messages discussing his death have been broadcast to the outside world, posted on radical Islamist Web sites, or intercepted by Western intelligence agencies. The bin Laden family has not been in mourning and reportedly has denied any knowledge of his death.

This is not the first time that bin Laden has been presumed dead. In 2002, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf speculated that bin Laden had died of kidney failure, and recurrent reports in the Pakistani press speculate that bin Laden is in declining health due to kidney problems. But no solid evidence that bin Laden actually has such an ailment has been published.

Bin Laden, 49, last appeared in a videotaped message delivered to the Arab television network Al Jazeera on October 29, 2004. In that speech, released four days before the American presidential elections, bin Laden sought to discredit the Bush Administration's strategy in the war against terrorism and incite Americans against their government. (See James Phillips, "Bin Laden's October Surmise," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 602, November 4, 2004, [www.heritage.org/research/MiddleEast/wm602.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/research/MiddleEast/wm602.cfm).)

Five audiotapes or Internet messages attributed to him have been released this year, including a June 29 recording lamenting the death of al-Qaeda's leader in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who had been killed in a U.S. air strike earlier that month. Bin Laden's reluctance to show his face may

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[www.heritage.org/research/MiddleEast/wm1224.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/research/MiddleEast/wm1224.cfm)

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have more to do with security considerations than health problems. Video potentially provides more information about his location than audiotape.

The Pakistani government stands to gain from reports of bin Laden's death because they deflect American pressure to do more to capture bin Laden, who is believed to be hiding along Pakistan's rugged border with Afghanistan. The most recent report of his death conveniently takes pressure off of Pakistan just as President Musharraf is visiting the United States after his government signed a truce with tribal leaders who have been sheltering al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorists in Pakistan's North Waziristan region.

### **Bin Ladenism Lives**

If the report of his death turns out to be true, the loss of bin Laden would be a psychological blow to al-Qaeda, but not much more. Bin Laden is believed to function more as the front man, propagandist, and "chairman of the board" of the terror

network rather than as its chief operational officer. Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin Laden's second in command, would probably be his successor.

Bin Ladenism will survive bin Laden. As a "martyr" for his cause, he will continue to inspire terrorist attacks against Americans for decades to come. To win the war on terrorism, the United States must not only hunt down the leaders of al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups, but also discredit and defeat the ideology that motivates their followers. This war of ideas will continue long after bin Laden's death. (See James Phillips, "The Evolving Al-Qaeda Threat," Heritage Foundation Lecture No. 928, March 17, 2006, [www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/hl928.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/hl928.cfm).)

*James Phillips is Research Fellow in Middle Eastern Studies, in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.*