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Subject:

Comments on Weiner NYTimes article on Bin Ladin

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27 April 1999

Comments on *New York Times* Article on Usama Bin Ladin

The article by Tim Weiner, "U.S. Hard Put to Find Proof Bin Ladin Directed Attacks," in the *New York Times* of 13 April 1999 contains several significant misrepresentations of US intelligence's view of Usama Bin Ladin, and of the extent of our knowledge of him and his organization. Specifically, the article overstates the degree to which the United States has blamed Bin Ladin for numerous terrorist acts, and understates the amount and specificity of the intelligence we have collected on him.

The article contains quotations attributed to former and current US officials, including intelligence officials. Several of the quoted comments are factually inaccurate. None of comments reflect any authorized exchanges between CIA officials and the journalist. CIA did provide Mr. Weiner a background briefing on Bin Ladin several months ago when he began work on this subject, but none of the statements made by CIA briefers appear to be reflected in the article.

Some of the Weiner article concerns the criminal case against Bin Ladin and the evidence that can be used in court. It would be up to the Department of Justice and FBI to comment on that aspect of the article. From an intelligence perspective, however, Bin Ladin's responsibility for the bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam is clear, based on voluminous information that includes:

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- The public statements of Bin Ladin's own alliance, which mirror the one claim of responsibility for the bombings.

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Further comments on the principal themes and assertions in the article follow:

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Bin Ladin's Power and Influence

The Weiner article suggests that Bin Ladin "may not be as powerful as some American officials have asserted" and is less a commander of terrorists than an inspiration to Muslims who sympathize with his message.

Bin Ladin's influence is multifaceted. It certainly is based in part on his charisma and ability to play upon resentments that resonate among a larger Muslim population. But he has also, over the last several years, evolved into a commander of terrorists. His power now rests in part on a globe-circling network of cells belonging to his own al-Qaida organization, and groups closely allied to him,

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U.S. Knowledge of Bin Ladin

Weiner's article quotes unnamed officials as saying that our knowledge of Bin Ladin is "sketchy" and that "we can't say for sure what was going on" with him from 1991 to 1996. The article further asserts that "we still don't know how to find him" and that the U.S. "has no spies in Afghanistan."

Thanks to a concentrated intelligence collection effort on Bin Ladin over the past three and a half years, we know more about him and his organization, allies, and activities than any other terrorist entity today.

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Bin Ladin's Role in the Bombing

The Times article questions whether there is good evidence on Bin Ladin's personal role in ordering the bombings. The article states that no known evidence implicates him, and that none of the informants involved have direct knowledge of Bin Ladin's involvement.

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As indicated above, separate reporting does link Bin Ladin himself to the bombing

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The Mechanism for Controlling the Operation

The article states that US authorities "still have no clear idea how" the Africa bombings were controlled and that there is little new information on "precisely how he might have instigated the bombings."

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Bin Ladin's Wealth

The article quotes former officials as saying that Bin Ladin "appears to control only a fraction of the \$250 million fortune that the American Government says he possesses" and that "clearly, his money's running out."

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Activities in Sudan

An unnamed official is quoted as saying that, in contradiction with the indictment against Bin Ladin, "there never was a bin Ladin-financed training camp in Sudan," and "I won't pretend we've got a good intelligence base on this period [1993-1995]."

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Blaming Bin Ladin for Other Attacks

A former official is quoted as saying that "we have, with I'm not sure what evidence, linked him to all of the terrorist acts of this year--of this decade, perhaps." The article further asserts that Bin Ladin "was blamed by American officials for instigating" the bombings of US military facilities in Saudi Arabia in 1995 and 1996, but that "no known evidence implicates him."

No one claims that Bin Ladin is linked to all terrorist acts, but we have good information that he was connected to, *inter alia*:

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Understanding Radical Islamic Threats

A former official is quoted as saying that "there had been confusion" after the World Trade Center bombing about the nature of radical Islamic threats to the United States. "There were lots of theories, not very good intelligence, and so the intelligence community actually started generating a picture that Usama Bin Ladin was, if you will, the new face of terrorism."

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Our understanding of the trends in radical Islamic terrorism in the six years since the Trade Center bombing is broad, deep, and backed by a large body of intelligence. There is indeed a "new face" that has emerged in the sense that groups not beholden to state sponsors have become a relatively larger part of the radical Islamist scene. Bin Ladin clearly is the preeminent individual in this trend, due not to any generation of pictures by the US intelligence community but rather to his own wealth-based influence and his more recent development into an operational terrorist leader.

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Bin Ladin's Criticisms of Saudi Policies

Weiner states that "Bin Ladin's criticisms of Saudi repression and corruption closely corresponded with State Department reports and CIA analyses."

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Momentum of the Case

The article states that publicly, at least, the case against Bin Ladin has lost momentum. Suspects remain at large, and the last arrest was more than six months ago.

The status of the criminal case should be addressed by the Department of Justice and the FBI.

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