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Subject: (AP) Officials think bin Laden involved in Europe plot

WASHINGTON (AP) – Osama bin Laden emerged October 1 as possibly a key figure in the European terror plot, and officials said he may be flexing his muscles in a move to show a besieged al-Qaida remains strong and able to launch major attacks on western targets. U.S. counterterrorism officials said they believe that senior al-Qaida leaders, including bin Laden, were involved in the plan to strike several European cities in a coordinated assault. If bin Laden had a direct hand in the planning, it would be the most active role he has played in a terror plot since the 9/11 attacks, according to U.S. officials and analysts.

Counterterrorism officials said that they are now working under the assumption that bin Laden played a role in the plotting, but they would not detail what indications they've seen that led them in that direction.

Still, some also believe that bin Laden's orders may have been delivered by one of his top commanders, since the al-Qaida leader is known to avoid close contact with anyone except his closet confidants.

While bin Laden's name is still a powerful reminder of the World Trade Center's twin towers and the Pentagon engulfed in flames, U.S. officials have for months asserted both in private and in hearings on Capitol Hill that his core al-Qaida group is weakened, struggling to raise money and attract recruits.

"Clearly there is a great deal of pressure on al-Qaida to do something to show that it is still alive and kicking," said Richard Barrett, the head of a U.N. group that monitors the threat posed by al-Qaida and the Taliban. "They need to show they're strong, they're a force multiplier, that they've still got some beef, that they've got operators abroad, that they can do things."

Barrett said al-Qaida's Pakistan-based network has not launched a successful attack since the London subway bombing in 2005. "In order to attract the younger new recruits, I think they have to do a bit better than that," he said.

The multi-pronged scope of the emerging terror plan _ which aimed to launch coordinated shooting rampages or attacks in Britain, France and Germany _ is an al-Qaida hallmark.

U.S. officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss intelligence matters, declined to reveal what evidence they have that bin Laden took a more prominent role in this plan. And one U.S. intelligence official cautioned that the details of how the plan was directed or coordinated by the group's core leaders is not yet clear.

The involvement of bin Laden and his devoted leaders, believed to be in hiding in Pakistan, underscores continuing U.S. concerns about that country's role as a safe haven for al-Qaida and other Islamic extremists.

And it reflects al-Qaida's persistent effort _ through video and online messages _ to inspire its followers to wage attacks against the West. The threat to Europe was highlighted when bin Laden issued a call to arms in March 2008 after a Danish newspaper printed controversial cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad.

He warned Europeans in an audio message that there would be a "severe" reaction to come.

Rep. Pete Hoekstra, R-Mich., the senior Republican on the House Intelligence Committee, said that bin Laden may simply be trying to re-exert himself. And his role in the European plot could suggest a lack of confidence by al-Qaida central in the ability of other affiliated groups in Yemen or Africa to carry out a successful attack on their own, Hoekstra said.

Over the past year, several terror attacks in the U.S. have either failed or been foiled, including the botched attempts to bring down a Detroit-bound airliner on Christmas Day and to set off a bomb in New York's Time Square.

"They've let other people take the lead on attacking the West," said Hoekstra, adding that bin Laden may now be

thinking, "these guys can't do it, we've got to become more involved again."

Bin Laden's presumed role in the European plot was first reported by NPR.

One senior U.S. official, meanwhile, discounted any involvement in the Europe terror plot by al-Qaida's North African affiliate. While al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb is dangerous in its region and may want to export its terror operations to Europe, there are no indications that it is able to do that at this time, said the official.

A Pakistani intelligence official said Thursday that eight Germans and two British brothers are at the heart of the European terror plot, which is still in its early stages. One of the Britons was killed in a recent CIA missile strike, he said.

Pakistan, Britain and Germany are tracking the suspects and intercepting their phone calls, the official told The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to release the information to the media.

U.S. officials have pressed Pakistan to increase its efforts to root out the militants hiding in the mountainous border region.

The U.S. has dramatically stepped up its missile attacks in North Waziristan, and is believed to have launched at least 21 this month. The covert campaign is largely carried out by CIA drones and has led to the deaths of a number of top militant leaders.

Pakistan has complained vocally about the program but is believed to provide intelligence assistance for at least some of the strikes.