



FPRI PERSPECTIVES ON BIN LADEN'S DEMISE

The world is better off without Osama bin Laden. But his demise does not mean the end of terrorism. What is bin Laden's legacy, and what will Al Qaeda and its affiliates do in the post-bin Laden era? We asked two Senior Fellows of FPRI to comment on these questions – Lawrence Husick and Barak Mendelsohn.

On Wednesday, May 4, Husick and Mendelsohn will be joined by other FPRI scholars at an FPRI Briefing on Bin Laden's Demise, from 3:30 to 5:00. Other participants will include Edward Turzanski, Jack Tomarchio, Michael Noonan, Stephen Gale, Andrew Garfield, David Danelo, Theodore Friend, and Eric Trager. Outside scholars participating in the briefing include Sumit Ganguly (University of Indiana), Mordechai Kedar (Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Bar Ilan University), and Christopher Swift. Reservations are required. RSVP: lux@fpri.org. If you can participate in person, you can listen in by phone. Instructions available on request.

OSAMA BIN LADEN:

THE EDISON OF ISLAMISM

By Lawrence Husick

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Osama bin Laden is dead and buried at sea. Barely 12 hours after the President's announcement, pundits are comfortably speaking of the man in the past tense. Many are doing the same with al Qaeda, as if shooting the man in the head effectively does the same to his movement. Those who think so fail to understand the importance of bin Laden's innovations, or the transformed nature of his organization, and this lack of understanding may prove dangerous in the months and years ahead.

Although Osama bin Laden did not invent the incandescent light bulb, he may yet be remembered as the Edison of Islamism, inventing al Qaeda, an innovation factory of terrorism without equal in the modern world. Using his own substantial personal fortune and funds drawn from diverse sources in the Islamic world including both real and sham charities, cybercrime and blood diamonds, bin Laden transformed the business of holy warrior defending a Muslim land from infidel invaders to a multinational brand, intent on restoring a caliphate that never was, and in the process, overthrowing the nation-states within dar al Islam and taking on the United States and its political and economic allies. That he failed was perhaps preordained. That he managed to shake the world is evidence of the continuing danger of his innovation.

The al Qaeda of the East African embassy bombings and the attack on the USS Cole no longer exists. A trillion war dollars and nearly 50,000 US dead and injured have erased the training camps and have, for the most part, choked off recruiting of young Muslims to travel to Afghanistan (though not entirely to Pakistan). The pre-9/11 command and control hierarchy, if it ever truly was effective, has been decimated by captures, missile strikes, and battlefield casualties. As a military organization, we have neutralized al Qaeda and have now cut off the head of the snake. Why, then, should it continue to concern us?

Put simply, we have spent nearly ten years in excising the al Qaeda tumor, but along the way, we failed to keep it from metastasizing, seeding dozens of new threats from the Far East to Latin America. Using the bloodstream of easy international travel and of the Internet, both ideology and know-how have spread around the world, allowing groups that were previously not like-minded or aligned to adopt the rhetoric and tactics of al Qaeda, and lowering the barriers to entry for formation of new groups for whom such rhetoric is a convenient add-on to localized grievances and goals.

For example, by using As Shahab media, Internet "memes" such as the slow-motion IED attack, "Juba" sniper video, and

“how to” lessons on everything from building a rocket to a suicide bomb vest have radicalized many fertile young minds prepared by Imams and others. Broadcast exhortations, particularly those by bin Laden and his lieutenants urging the religious duty of jihad and the need to strike at the West by hitting the “joints of the economy” have culminated in the “Leverage” campaign of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) that announced its intention to use a bombing plot costing \$4,600 in order to cause the West to have to screen every cargo shipment by air, at a cost of hundreds of millions of dollars per year. Other groups, including many pre-existing ones, have renamed themselves with the al Qaeda “brand” despite a weak alignment of interests or goals.

In the past, we have likened al Qaeda to a venture capital firm, seeking leverage through small early investments of capital and know-how in emerging markets. Others have used the franchising analogy to describe how terrorism has spread across the globe. What these approaches have in common is the recognition that to be effective, bin Laden’s innovative approach did not require either his direct leadership or any transfer of personnel. What bin Laden and his deputies constructed was a 21st century extension of the classic insurgent cell organization, in which their transnational theater of operations both required and benefitted from new forms of communication and organization that allowed rapid innovation in doctrine and tactics. For at least the first six years of the fight, these advances kept al Qaeda ahead in the innovation race.

It is ironic that the compound that housed bin Laden in Pakistan may have been the only house in the neighborhood that lacked both a telephone line and a connection to the Internet. It is likely that bin Laden recognized that such communications, so essential to the al Qaeda “business model” would be used to locate him, and so he reverted to using face-to-face communication through trusted intermediaries. Perhaps this is what made him so difficult to find, but it also attenuated his role in the movement that he created.

At the end, bin Laden’s role was more inspirational than operational, but now dead, his inspirational role may increase as the political upheavals of the Arab Spring turn away from the meager offerings of radical Islam and to more prosaic matters of jobs and food, both marginalizing and further radicalizing bin Laden’s followers. Only time will tell whether the leverage gained from terrorism will be sufficient to sustain the al Qaeda brand that bin Laden invented.

AFTER BIN LADEN

By Barak Mendelsohn

Barak Mendelsohn is a Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute and Assistant Professor of Political Science at Haverford College.

Osama bin Laden’s death is a devastating blow to al-Qaeda, but it is not the end of jihadi terrorism. While it is demoralizing for the whole jihadi camp, it will not eliminate the motivation to attack the U.S. and is likely to trigger revenge attacks. But from strategic point of view the death of bin Laden could mark a critical junction in the process of demilitarizing the war on terrorism and the beginning of the end for U.S. presence in Afghanistan.

Al-Qaeda will survive bin Laden’s death. Al-Qaeda and jihadism will continue not merely because bin Laden’s legacy will keep feeding jihadi terrorism, but because the jihadis’ radical interpretation of Islam still resonates with some Muslims. But bin Laden’s importance for al-Qaeda and the adverse effects his death will have on the group, cannot be overstated. His unique centrality is unlikely to be replicated by any of his potential successors. Although his operational role greatly diminished since 9/11, bin Laden was the embodiment of al-Qaeda. He devised the group’s strategy, and was a strong symbol of resistance. Beyond successful tactical measures to preserve the group and American strategic missteps, it was the power of bin Laden’s charisma that allowed al-Qaeda to survive tremendous losses after 9/11 and become a brand name that attracted individuals and other jihadi groups.

Paradoxically, bin Laden was simultaneously the power behind al-Qaeda’s ascendance and a major cause for its decline. During the 1990s, at a time when jihadis’ confrontations with the ‘close enemy’ regimes in Egypt and Algeria failed, bin Laden offered an alternative course of action. By attacking the U.S., he triggered a momentous set of events, and positioned himself and al-Qaeda at the forefront of the jihadi camp. But bin Laden was also an inept strategist. His strategy was based on extremely unrealistic expectations that the U.S. will quickly crumble, and that the Muslim masses will hurry to join al-Qaeda’s ranks. Bin Laden’s fantasy plan, which promised to solve the problems of the umma, cost the lives of many innocent people as he encouraged numerous young Muslims to engage in an orgy of violence, often massacring co-religionists in the name of God. But bin Laden’s strategy did not bring the anticipated fruits and failed to recreate a Caliphate or bring down even one single Arab ruler. Instead, in his last days alive, the Muslim youth bin Laden was counting on were demonstrating throughout the Middle East, calling for democratic reforms which he saw as signs of infidelity. His silence since the Arab Spring started was deafening.

Bin Laden's leadership style magnified al-Qaeda problems. Bin Laden was a benign authoritarian: while maintaining an above the fray image, and a holy-like demeanor, bin Laden mastered the skills to quietly suppress internal opposition. He kept the organization relatively cohesive even as its operation became increasingly diffused in response to the heavy international pressure. After 9/11 bin Laden even succeeded in bringing critics such as abu Musab al-Suri to close ranks behind him. However, his strategy pushed al-Qaeda over the brink and its grave mistakes (primarily the killing of Muslim civilians) slowly fractured bin Laden's image. People who once were close associates started criticizing him publicly.

And yet bin Laden maintained his unique position inside the jihadi universe and far beyond. Others may prove to be better strategists but no individual, including his lieutenant al-Zawahiri, possesses similar aura of invincibility and appeal among Muslims. Whoever succeeds bin Laden will find that for his sympathizers throughout the world bin Laden the leader can only be replaced by bin Laden the myth and the symbol. Terrorism will endure but strategic objectives will become even harder to achieve.

His successor will have to struggle with difficult problems bin Laden managed to postpone due to his stature and allure. Prominent among these issues will be how to maintain al-Qaeda's anti-American and anti-Western narrative. Revenge may prove a useful way to motivate al-Qaeda members and sympathizers to continue bin Laden's plans and attack the U.S. and its allies, but without a compelling strategic vision that will tie such attacks to strategic change, the appeal of such a campaign will be short lived.

The need to preserve the broader al-Qaeda network will confound the challenges of bin Laden's replacement. Franchises that swore allegiance to bin Laden himself may not accept the authority of his successor. Even if they chose to remain part of al-Qaeda outwardly, the inclination of most franchises to focus on local conflicts is likely to increase, though Western targets in the franchises' theater of responsibility will probably retain their preferred status. At the same time, the leadership of al-Qaeda's branch in the Arabian Peninsula, which in the past couple of years, eclipsed the central organization, may even present a direct challenge to the leadership in South Asia in the post-bin Laden era. Combining the operational opportunity due to the unrest in Yemen, presence near the birthplace of Islam, and an intimate relationship with the dead leader, the leaders of this branch could vie for leadership of the jihadi movement.

As events in the Middle East highlight the weakness of its 'far enemy' strategy, al-Qaeda will be pressed to produce a much more compelling reaction than its spokesmen, al-Zawahiri, abu Yahya al-Libi and Atiyatallah, have offered so far. The new al-Qaeda leader will not have the privileges bin Laden enjoyed and he will face much more pointed critique if he does not provide a strategic direction for the group. With regimes collapsing throughout the Middle East, even the greatest supporters of al-Qaeda will feel inclined to focus on events back home and abandon global jihad. Examples from Libya and Egypt suggest that some jihadis may even abandon local jihads altogether and seek reintegration into their societies. As a result, al-Qaeda may end up largely irrelevant to setting the future of the Middle East. Moreover, it could end up increasingly dependent on Western recruits -- many of whom are ignorant about Islam -- for continuing its anti-Western agenda. Such developments, albeit still gravely threatening to Western countries, will push al-Qaeda further away from its Islamic roots and from the areas it is mostly concerned with, the states of the Middle East.

While the strategic threat from al-Qaeda will probably decline, the motivation for revenge attacks by groups and individuals in the West will be at its highest level. Lone terrorists and "homegrown" cells in particular will seek to avenge bin Laden, and they will be even less discriminate in their killings. In addition, al-Qaeda affiliates throughout the Middle East will want to demonstrate their sympathy by carrying out attacks in memory of bin Laden. Pakistan will probably suffer (as always) the greatest carnage as multiple local jihadi groups will seek to take revenge against the Pakistani state and its citizens.

Over the long run, the prospects of ending U.S. intervention in Afghanistan have increased considerably. Bin Laden's death provides the U.S. an opportunity to declare victory and start withdrawing from the country. The Afghan Taliban, on the other hand, will find that bin Laden's death released them from a great liability and could make it easier for them to sever their links with al-Qaeda; after all the Taliban have much greater interest in regaining control over Afghanistan than waging a global jihad. If both sides will take advantage of the opportunity to wind down the war in Afghanistan, bin Laden's death will mark a stepping stone in demilitarizing the global war on terrorism and toward dealing with terrorism through intelligence and police work.

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