

With Osama Bin Laden Gone, Al Qaeda Just Got a Lot Weaker

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Although bin Laden played little if any operational role over the past few years, he was the face of the organization and the voice of its extremist narrative, and his death could mark a turning point in the decade-long global struggle against terrorism.

Nearly 10 years after the attacks of Sept. 11, and a year to the day after the Times Square bomb plot, the last attempted terrorist attack in New York City, U.S. Special Forces killed Al Qaeda chief Osama Bin Laden in a safehouse some 40 miles north of Islamabad, Pakistan. Many pundits were quick to point out that Bin Laden became little more than a figurehead for Al Qaeda long ago and dismissed his death as little more than a moral victory.

In fact, though Bin Laden played little if any operational role over the past few years, he was the face of the organization and the voice of its extremist narrative and ideology. His death could mark a turning point in the decade-long global struggle against terrorism.

In the near term, Bin Laden's death presents an opportunity for terrorist recruiters and fund-raisers. Like that of Che Guevara, Bin Laden's countenance will appear on T-shirts and posters for a long time to come. As an advertising and fund-raising tool, he may prove to be as effective in death as he was in life, at least in the short term.

But the loss of Bin Laden is more than just the loss of a household name; it is a major blow to the morale of Al Qaeda foot soldiers and the stability of the leadership of the Al Qaeda core.

Bin Laden's deputy, the Egyptian physician-turned-terrorist Ayman al-Zawahiri, will undoubtedly succeed the dead man as chief of Al Qaeda. But whereas Bin Laden was a unifying figurehead, Zawahiri is a divisive figure whose accession to the top spot in the hierarchy may well rekindle simmering tensions between Al Qaeda's Egyptian, Yemeni and other members and followers.

Such tensions have a long history within the organization. For example, L'Houssaine Kertchou, an early Al Qaeda operative, became bitter after one of Bin Laden's aides turned down his request for \$500 to cover the costs of his wife's Caesarean section. His anger boiled over when Al Qaeda paid for the travel of a group of Egyptians sent to Yemen to renew their passports. "If I had a gun," Kertchou later testified, "I would [have shot Bin Laden] at that time."

Further, it can't be overstated that Bin Laden's death, on the heels of the Arab Spring, comes at a sensitive time for Al Qaeda. The upheavals throughout the region have presented an especially acute challenge to Al Qaeda's nihilistic ideology and world-view. In a matter of weeks, a bunch of Arab youth succeeded in doing relatively peacefully what Al Qaeda and its ilk failed to accomplish through many years of indiscriminate violence.

With some of Al Qaeda's original ideologues recanting their support for the group's acts of violence, and the Middle East looking not toward the terrorist network, which offers no alternative to the status quo, but toward technocratic political reformers who offer a concrete platform for near-term change, the loss of Bin Laden will be especially felt. In fact, just in the weeks leading up to Bin Laden's death, a Pew Research Center survey of Muslim publics around the world found little support for the Al Qaeda leader.

Yet, as can be expected, all is not rosy. Despite his death, the groups, franchises and followers Bin Laden founded and inspired continue to aim at Western targets. Just last week, German authorities arrested three suspected Al Qaeda operatives who were reportedly in the final stages of planning terrorist attacks in Germany. This is just the latest international plot to highlight the fact that the terrorist threat to the West remains clear and present.

Not only Al Qaeda and franchises like Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, but affiliates like Lashkar-e-Taiba and homegrown extremists inspired by Al Qaeda's radical narrative and ideology, remain intent on, and, to varying degrees, capable of, carrying out terrorist attacks. Whether Bin Laden is dead or alive, some of these organized terrorists and homegrown violent extremists will continue to demonstrate a resolve to take overt, operational steps to carry out terrorist actions. Indeed, his death may push some over the radical edge and mobilize others already radicalized to carry out terrorist plots. But it is also true that intelligence operations force our adversaries to react, creating communications, travel and funding trails that can lead to further disruptions.

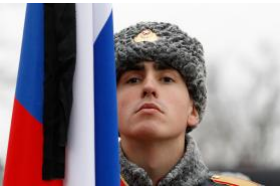
These will not end terrorism, which has spread well beyond the Al Qaeda core, but they could usher in further counterterrorism successes in the long war against the asymmetric threat of global terrorism. The death of Bin Laden is more than just a violent shake of the tree; it is more like chopping down the tallest tree in the forest.

Matthew Levitt is director of the [Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11&newActiveSubNav=Stein%20Program%20on%20Counterterrorism%20and%20Intelligence&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D11&newActiveNav=researchPi) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11&newActiveSubNav=Stein%20Program%20on%20Counterterrorism%20and%20Intelligence&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D11&newActiveNav=researchPi>)

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