

Usama bin Laden: A Post-Mortem

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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Nearly ten years after the attacks of September 11, and a year to the day after the failed Times Square bomb plot, U.S. Special Forces killed al-Qaeda chief Usama bin Laden in a safe house some forty miles north of Islamabad, Pakistan. What are the immediate implications of bin Laden's death for al-Qaeda, its franchises, and its followers? What does his death mean for counterterrorism and intelligence efforts going forward?

A Figurehead Gone

Although bin Laden played little if any operational role over the past few years, his was the face of the organization and the voice of its extremist narrative and ideology. 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 fundraising tool, he may prove to be as effective in death as he was in life, at least in the near 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 leaders alike and a major morale boost to the United States and its allies.

Tensions within al-Qaeda

Bin Laden's deputy, the Egyptian physician turned terrorist Ayman al-Zawahiri, will undoubtedly succeed bin Laden as chief of al-Qaeda. Bin Laden publicly expressed his expectation -- and hope -- that he would be "martyred," and surely laid out succession plans a long time ago. Moreover, for some time now Zawahiri has been running the day-to-day operations of the organization's headquarters elements in Pakistan. While bin Laden was a unifying figurehead, Zawahiri is a divisive figure whose accession to the top spot in the al-Qaeda hierarchy may well rekindle simmering tensions between al-Qaeda's Egyptian and Yemeni factions and other members and followers,

tensions that have a long history within the organization.

Blow to Extremist Narrative

The death of bin Laden is all the more significant coming on the heels of the Arab Spring. The large numbers of Arab protesters have shown that their agenda does not embrace al-Qaeda's nihilistic ideology and worldview. The Middle East is looking not toward al-Qaeda, which offers no attractive alternative to the status quo, but toward technocratic political reformers, who offer a concrete platform for near-term change. In fact, in the weeks leading up to bin Laden's death, a Pew Research Center survey of Muslim publics worldwide found little support for the al-Qaeda leader. And in a matter of weeks relatively peaceful protestors were able to bring down several Arab governments, something 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, its radical narrative and extremist ideology is looking less and less like a route to success. Bin Laden's death strips him of the mystique of the invulnerable chief successfully eluding Western intelligence while his group continues to carry out attacks worldwide.

Threat Remains Acute

And yet, despite bin Laden's death, his legacy continues to present an acute threat to the West. Al-Qaeda and franchises such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) as well as affiliates like Lashkar-e-Taibah and homegrown extremists inspired by al-Qaeda's radical narrative and ideology remain intent and, to varying degrees, capable of carrying out terrorist attacks. Indeed, the radicalization and recruitment has changed so significantly that according to the FBI's Assistant Director for Counterterrorism Mark Giuliano, "Thousands of extremist websites promote violence to a worldwide audience predisposed to the extremist message, and more of these websites and U.S. citizens are involved in internet radicalization." And the radicalizers creating the environment in which people are predisposed to extremist ideology are geographically and demographically diverse. "We have seen internet radicalization in individuals as young as fourteen years old," Giuliano noted. 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.

Intelligence Victory

It took a decade, but the intelligence community finally accomplished what some feared was impossible: finding the needle in a haystack. Bin Laden's safe house reportedly featured no telephone or internet connection, presumably in an attempt to protect him from the electronic surveillance for which Western intelligence is renowned. Ironically, his downfall was the result of old-school human intelligence (HUMINT) from informants that some reports suggest included a senior and trusted al-Qaeda courier. Such success can breed further success; officials believe, for example, that the punishing campaign of drone attacks on militants in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas has undermined their allegiance to al-Qaeda and other militant groups and contributed to the ability of intelligence officials to recruit assets and informers. The death of Usama bin Laden is more than just a violent shake of the tree: it is a toppling of the tallest tree in the forest.

Matthew Levitt is director of The Washington Institute's [Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11>).



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