

Perspectives

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Radical Islamist Terrorism after Osama bin Laden

by Dr. Jerrold M. Post

When American President Barak Obama announced on the evening of May 2 the killing of Osama bin Laden in a raid by a special operations team on his massive compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, it touched off demonstrations throughout the U.S., with crowds chanting "U.S.A., U.S.A.!". The number one terrorist in the world, the man responsible for the largest terrorist attack ever on the United States, forever shattering US illusions of invulnerability, had finally been killed, after nearly two decades of pursuit and a fifty million-dollar bounty on his head. The euphoria reflected a wide spread sentiment that his death would mark the end of terrorism as we know it.

A Unique Leadership Style

But in order to understand the impact of his death on the future course of Islamist terrorism, we must first understand the nature of his leadership. For other charismatically-led terrorist organizations, such as Abdullah Ocalan's PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) of Turkey, Abimael Guzman's Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) of Peru, and Vellupillai Prabhakaran's Tamil Tigers (LTTE) (the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) of Sri Lanka, it was a mortal blow to the organizations when the leaders who so ruthlessly controlled their organizations were killed or captured. In contrast, perhaps informed by his education in business management at Abdul Azziz University in Saudi Arabia, Osama bin Laden established a flat and dispersed organizational structure, in which subordinates were entrusted with clearly designated responsibilities, and their successors were seamlessly promoted. Unique among terrorist organizations in many ways, al-Qaeda did not have a hierarchical structure. Rather, bin Laden served in effect as chairman of the board of a holding company, which can be termed "Radical Islam, Inc.", a loose umbrella organization of semi-autonomous terrorist groups and organizations, with bin Laden providing inspiration, guidance, coordination, and financial and logistical facilitation.

After the destruction of al-Qaeda central in the 2001 war in Afghanistan, it was initially believed that a crippling blow had been dealt to al-Qaeda and that it was the beginning of the end. But al-Qaeda has always been a resilient organization, so that the death or capture of a senior official would swiftly and seamlessly lead to his replacement. Al-Qaeda is a learning organization, and as a consequence of the blow to al-Qaeda Version 1.0 in 2001, bin Laden sent a communiqué in 2002, which dispersed the organization and developed a regional command structure. Under his guidance, al-Qaeda 1.0 had morphed into al-Qaeda 2.0. In December 2002, in one of the last videotaped messages, suggesting intimations of his own

mortality, a gaunt bin Laden, looking seriously ill, said, "Whether your servant Osama lives or dies does not matter. He has shown the way".

Bin Laden grew his corporation by mergers and acquisitions. In 2002, he embraced attacks in Bali, Yemen, and Moscow as a "response to what happened to all Muslims brothers around the world... The incidents that have taken place since the raids on New York and Washington until now... are only reactions and reciprocal actions. These actions were carried out by the zealous sons of Islam in defense of their religion and in response to the order of their God and prophet". These actions were planned and carried out independently, but bin Laden was able to claim credit for these successes.

A reflection of the organizational genius of bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri was to co-opt and embrace potential rivals. But there were occasions when actions carried out by groups operating under the al-Qaeda umbrella were excessive and indiscriminate and threatened the al-Qaeda reputation. The growing power of Abu

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Musab al-Zarqawi led to an affiliation with al-Qaeda, after which he renamed his organization Al-Qaeda of Mesopotamia, and swore allegiance "to the sheikh of the mujabedeem, Osama bin Laden". But when Zarqawi's indiscriminate violence, including taking contractors hostage and beheading them on television, threatened al-Qaeda's reputation, Bin Laden and Zawahiri were both very mindful of the public image they were trying to create

and the need to not damage it. Zawahiri issued a public letter admonishing Zarqawi to keep the offending group in line: "We are extremely concerned, as are the mujabedeem and all sincere Muslims about your jihad... Among the things which the feelings of the Muslim populace, who love and support you, will never find palatable, are the scenes of slaughtering the hostages".

Challenges of Succession

With the US tendency to personalize its enemies, there had been a wistful hope that the death of bin Laden would mean the end of the threat from al-Qaeda. The demonstrations in the US occasioned by bin Laden's killing in the special operation in Abbottabad reflected this. However, it will not. To be sure, his death is a blow to the organization. But the same resiliency that al-Qaeda has demonstrated when senior officials were killed or captured will also be a response to his death. His designated successor and co-founder of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who for years has in effect functioned as the CEO of al-Qaeda, with bin Laden as Chairman of the Board, is to be sure quite different from bin Laden. He is considered, if anything, more extreme in his ideology, but less inspirational, and more detail oriented. In the al-Qaeda Terrorism Manual, which he is believed to have penned, among the instructions for how to live underground in the land of the enemy is such advice as "Do not park in no parking zones".

Zawahiri has been the public face of al-Qaeda for the past nine years, and indeed released five videos already this spring in reaction to the Jasmine Revolution. Al-Qaeda has been quite successful in propagating the concept that the only way to effect change in the Middle East is through jihad, to strike violently against apostate leaders. And the Arab Spring has challenged this, embracing the path of non-violent protest and revolution, and appealing to the same discontented Muslim youth who previously only had one path available. This is a major challenge for al-Qaeda and its leadership.

Al-Qaeda 3.0

While Zawahiri recently appeared in a new video, the first since bin Laden's death, he did not assert that he was the new leader, reflecting perhaps that the succession process is still in flux. He did eulogize bin Laden as an ongoing source of inspiration for Muslims, and warned the United States that there would be reprisals for the killing of al-Qaeda's leader. Indeed, several attacks have been carried out in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Morocco, and a plot in Germany was foiled, where the claim was that the perpetrators were to avenge bin Laden's killing.

While Zawahiri was recently confirmed as the new leader of al-Qaeda, what is clear is that no one can replace the charismatic bin Laden. Thus, regardless of who does emerge on top, this represents a new chapter in the evolving history of al-Qaeda, what can appropriately be named al-Qaeda 3.0. The next generation of al-Qaeda leaders were already restive, complaining about the lack of major actions by the organization, yet still restrained by the leadership. With bin Laden's death, it is anticipated that the earlier coherence will erode further, and that there may well be an unsettled period as one leader competes with another. Anwar al-Awlaki, "the bin Laden of the internet", can be expected to increase his efforts to radicalize online, attempting to attract more "lone wolves", although the death of bin Laden will diminish the allure of al-Qaeda for potential recruits. Thus while radical Islamist terrorism will change, it surely will not disappear, but rather will become more diffuse, less organized, and less coherent.



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Dr. Post has devoted his entire career to the field of political psychology. Dr. Post came to George Washington after a 21 year career with the Central Intelligence Agency where he founded and directed the Center for the Analysis of Personality and Political Behavior, an interdisciplinary behavioral science unit which provided assessments of foreign leadership and decision making for the President and other senior officials to prepare for Summit meetings and other high level negotiations and for use in crisis situations. He played the lead role in developing the “Camp David profiles” of Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat for President Jimmy Carter and initiated the U.S. government program in understanding the psychology of terrorism. In recognition of his leadership of the Center, Dr. Post was awarded the Intelligence Medal of Merit in 1979, and received the Studies in Intelligence Award in 1980. He received the Nevitt Sanford Award for Distinguished Professional Contributions to Political Psychology in 2002.

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