

Perspectives

Vol. III Issue 5 May 2011

A New Milestone for America

by Dr. John Hamre

The death of Osama bin Laden marked a significant milestone for America, though it is less clear what his passing means elsewhere. The terrorist attack in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001 was a searing experience for America. Every single American stopped what they were doing and focused that day on the unfolding tragedy that took the lives of 3000 citizens and residents. These past 10 years have been profoundly shaped by that day.

No one more personifies this era than Osama bin Laden. Born to privilege in Saudi Arabia, he became the symbol of a movement that in those early days was thought to be vast and ominous. I well remember conversations in the months following 9/11 that America and the West were in a “global war on terrorism” that had no plausible end. Indeed, at one point several years into this war, then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously asked in a memo to his staff “are we creating more terrorists than removing them?”

Yet behind the scenes our intelligence community systematically started mapping the Al Qaeda leadership infrastructure. We started active collaboration with nations spanning the globe, some of which harbored virulent cells of extremists. And we mounted a systematic campaign to eliminate this leadership.

This campaign has been hugely successful. Well before Navy SEAL forces broke into the bin Laden compound and shot him, Al Qaeda was widely considered a broken organization. It no longer seemed to be able to mount well-planned operations. Instead, it seemed to function largely as an inspirational core, holding out an image of a mission to inspire local self-appointed operatives who embraced the Al Qaeda banner. Indeed, what we now know is that bin Laden lived for six years in this isolated compound in Pakistan. Far from being a field marshal of insurgent forces gathering momentum against the United States in Afghanistan and elsewhere, bin Laden appears now to have been an increasingly diminished force, even within his own organization. One European “arabist” told me in the days following the death of bin Laden, “he was politically dead several years ago.”

Bin Laden’s attack on 9/11 had far reaching consequences. It set America on a path that has produced enormous alienation in the Muslim world. Despite President George W. Bush’s frequent and sincere statements that America does not have hostile intentions toward Islam as a religion, the climate of fear and revenge nurtured angry voices in America—like the self-appointed pastor in Florida who burned the Koran in a barbecue pit—that has alienated huge swaths of the Muslim world.

But 9/11 also triggered other changes in the Arab world that are just now starting to emerge in our consciousness. Throughout the region we are seeing an

authentic and organic debate among Arab Muslims about the appropriate role of society, state and Islam. I recently spent several days in Morocco, meeting with the head of the opposition Islamic party. To my surprise he told me that the central plank in their party platform is “separation of church and state.” The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is presently engaged in a hot debate over this same proposition. Throughout the region, bin Laden is no longer an inspiration. Iran is no longer an inspiration. Syria is no inspiration. What I hear repeatedly is that the model being charted by Prime Minister Erdogan in Turkey is being seen as the model for the future. Prime Minister Erdogan is leading an Islamic party in a secular state. The AK Party is seeking to widen the freedom of religious Turks without unhinging the fundamental features of a secular state. It is not without its complications and difficulties. Yet it is increasingly seen by other political leaders throughout the

region as the way ahead for their countries.

“Nothing more effectively repudiates the bin Laden legacy than the so-called ‘Arab spring.’ Throughout the Arab world, citizens are engaged in an authentic and organic quest for control over their own destinies.”

Nothing more effectively repudiates the bin Laden legacy than the so-called “Arab spring.” Throughout the Arab world, citizens are engaged in an authentic and organic quest for control over their own destinies. Change has come quickly and relatively peacefully in places like Tunisia and Egypt. Syria is wracked by a painful struggle. Other states have found ways to take the negative energy off the streets, but have not yet found a formula that resolves

the rising expectations of populations set free by examples in other states.

In all of this, what is startling is the near complete absence of the radical bin Laden narrative. No doubt there are still angry individuals throughout the region that find appeal in a violent, rejectionist message. But this is increasingly being rejected by large swaths of society. Average citizens want a better tomorrow for themselves and for their children, and see little appeal in the angry rejectionist language of the past 10 years.

When I meet with Americans who continue to rejoice in the demise of bin Laden I remind them that the Arab spring is largely unaffected by America’s rhetoric

or preferences. Bin Laden was no longer an inspiration to average citizens. But America is not seen as terribly inspirational either. Our sweeping rhetoric about “democracy” falls flat in Arab ears, who see this more as American self-promotion, and a not-so-veiled push for American cultural interests rather than fundamental political values.

Yet the Arab spring is a profound opportunity, largely for Arabs, but also for America. Ultimately this is a quest by Arab citizens to find their own future, defining objectives in terms of safety and prosperity and opportunity for family and friends. American lectures are uninspiring. American opportunities are. Doing what we know best here in the United States—building healthier lives, healthier communities, healthier societies—is what Arabs too now seek. And no doubt there are pathways where the journey to safety, prosperity and opportunity here reinforces similar efforts in the Arab world. The great and healthy dynamism of American society will once again save America. And that same impulse could help the Arab world.

In past weeks I have been approached by dozens of businessmen, heads of non-governmental organizations and average citizens, all with a proposal to help create opportunity in Egypt, or in other countries in the Middle East. Almost none of these efforts start with government programs or funding. Most simply want the U.S. Government to know about their efforts and not get in the way. Americans want to help and are finding individual ways to do so.

The death of Osama bin Laden was largely an irrelevancy in the Arab Muslim world compared to the events of the Arab Spring. The fact that it captured headlines day after day here in the United States says more about how bin Laden changed our lives than it did about how he affected Muslims today. Now is the time to drop our blinders and see what is happening in the Muslim world. Although another attack is possible, the global war on terrorism is largely over. Now we should open the way for the global campaign of prosperity and opportunity. That would again make America the welcome leader of our imaginations.



Dr. John Hamre was elected president and CEO of CSIS in January 2000. Before joining CSIS, he served as the 26th U.S. deputy secretary of defense. Prior to holding that post, he was the under secretary of defense (comptroller) from 1993 to 1997. As comptroller, Dr. Hamre was the principal assistant to the secretary of defense for the preparation, presentation, and execution of the defense budget and management improvement programs. In 2007, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates appointed Dr. Hamre to serve as chairman of the Defense Policy Board.

Before serving in the Department of Defense, Dr. Hamre worked for 10 years as a professional staff member of the Senate Armed Services Committee. During that time, he was primarily responsible for the oversight and evaluation of procurement, research, and development programs, defense budget issues, and relations with the Senate Appropriations Committee. From 1978 to 1984, Dr. Hamre served in the Congressional Budget Office, where he became its deputy assistant director for national security and international affairs. In that position, he oversaw analysis and other support for committees in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. Dr. Hamre received his Ph.D., with distinction, in 1978 from the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University in Washington, D.C., where his studies focused on international politics and economics and U.S. foreign policy. In 1972, he received his B.A., with high distinction, from Augustana College in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, emphasizing political science and economics. The following year he studied as a Rockefeller fellow at the Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Perspectives is a monthly opinion piece authored by leading practitioners and academics in the fields of public diplomacy and Arab media. The publication provides a forum to contextualize and analyze salient topics, concepts and developments that are of interest to the public diplomacy community as well as to Arab media followers. The views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Layalina Productions, Inc.

Layalina Productions, Inc. helps bridge the divide between the Arab world and the United States by fostering cultural, educational, and professional dialogues through effective television programming and publications. Layalina is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation funded through tax-deductible donations from individuals and corporations, and through grants by foundations based in the U.S. and the Arab world. Please support Layalina by making a tax-deductible donation. Visit www.Layalina.tv or call 202-776-7761 for more information.