



INSS Insight No. 254, May 4, 2011

Initial Thoughts upon the Assassination of Bin Laden

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The news that the most wanted terrorist in the world, certainly in the last decade – a title that Bin Laden himself said he was proud to bear – was eliminated prompts an initial sigh of relief and perhaps even a sense of satisfaction that a person who was directly responsible for the deliberate murder of thousands of innocent people has finally met his due. Still, even at this early stage it is appropriate to consider some issues the assassination raises: its effect on future al-Qaeda activities, the response we may expect from Bin Laden's operatives and associates in the global jihad movement, the future of the global war on terrorism, and even moral questions about the use of targeted assassination as a tool in that war.

In order to examine the possible effects of Bin Laden's elimination, it is necessary first to understand his importance to al-Qaeda. Bin Laden was the organization's undisputed leader and sole arbiter, though this does not mean that organization members never questioned his decisions, including the decision to carry out the 9/11 attacks. Bin Laden built and ran al-Qaeda according to his own approach, backed by an extreme Salafist ideology that purported to represent the purest version of Islam, in the spirit of the prophet Mohammad. At times he was personally involved in organizing al-Qaeda terrorist attacks. His involvement in running the organization continued through the first years after 9/11, as was made clear by recently published Wikileaks documents. However, in recent years, the hypothesis was that because of the intense hunt for Bin Laden and the stepped-up activities of the US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which put him at risk, Bin Laden reduced his practical involvement in the organization, stopped commanding it, and turned into its symbolic figurehead. In addition, items were published to the effect that Bin Laden was very ill; some of them even stated that he was dead. With his death it may be possible to learn more about his whereabouts and doings in the last few years – either from information that al-Qaeda may release, as the organization makes a habit of glorifying the exploits of its senior personnel after their death, or from American sources that apparently had detailed information about Bin Laden's doings in recent months and likely acquired more information from what was seized in the raid on his compound.

The fact that almost a decade passed from when Bin Laden became a wanted man until the Americans managed to locate and eliminate him has given rise to scathing criticism for what has been called an intelligence and operational failure. This was joined by expressions of incredulity about the ineffectiveness of those in the United States charged with prosecuting the war on terrorism. Indeed, in the past there were statements to the effect that more than once Bin Laden's hiding place had been identified but that he always managed to escape at the last minute thanks to loyal helpers, perhaps even with the assistance of interested intelligence agencies, and his own good luck.

Without a doubt too much time passed until Bin Laden met his due punishment. Still, in the war against terrorism extended time is usually needed to capture and punish wanted high profile arch-terrorists, such as Hizbollah's Imad Mughniyeh (25 years), Wadiya Hadad of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (10 years), and Carlos "the Jackal" (some 20 years). Operations to capture or kill wanted personalities, certainly senior level figures who have taken great pains in their hiding and are well guarded, are not what are depicted in Hollywood movies. They require Sisyphean groundwork based on human intelligence ("humint") and signal intelligence ("signit") combined with singular operational capabilities of elite units, and often entail decisions with high political significance and risk. In recent years, the United States has exhibited very high intelligence gathering and operational capabilities, leading to the elimination or apprehension of many al-Qaeda operatives, especially in the Af-Pak arena. There is no doubt that although belated, the successful elimination of Bin Laden demonstrated impressive capabilities and determination, the fruit of longstanding efforts to find the man responsible for the largest terrorist attack in history.

However, it is almost certain that in the short term the elimination of the organization's leader, despite the symbolic and perhaps even operational significance, will not spell an end to al-Qaeda's terrorist activities. Although it has sustained severe blows, al-Qaeda for more than two decades has shown itself to be an orderly bureaucratic hierarchy with excellent survival skills, capable of filling the void left by senior commanders and operatives who were killed or apprehended. Moreover, the desire for vengeance and the clear need to prove that despite the blow al-Qaeda maintains organizational morale and assault capabilities are likely to lead to more high profile spectacular attacks. This may come from al-Qaeda itself, joined by its close allies bearing the al-Qaeda brand name in Hijaz, in the Maghreb, and in Iraq, and from more distant organizations allied with global jihad, or even from enterprising individuals known as "lone wolves" who have already proven their ability to act in the United States and Europe.

The question of the cost effectiveness of eliminating terrorist leaders and the risk this entails, as well as the question of this type of operation's legitimacy in the context of the war against terrorism, are also expected to be debated in public, especially in light of the probability of further terrorist attacks and the ensuing bloodshed of innocent civilians.

Even if at the moment it is impossible to state definitively what the profit-loss balance of the operation in Pakistan will ultimately be like, it is thus far enjoying support and sympathy from politicians in the West and in some Arab states. For it to be of strategic significance, however, the United States and its allies must continue their sequence of similar operations to apprehend or eliminate senior al-Qaeda operatives; only further similar operations can constitute a lethal blow to the organization and cause its eventual complete paralysis.

In a frontal confrontation like the one taking place against an ideological, zealous, and radical organization such as al-Qaeda, there is no limit to the escalation and destruction within its desire and capability. Thus, the war against it is to the death and there is no telling how long it may take. As for the legitimacy of assassinating Bin Laden, it seems that the vast majority of world leaders and global public opinion, including in many Muslim countries, share the consensus that it was justified, though in the past targeted assassination as a necessary tool in the war against terrorism lacked such sweeping support. Apparently the resentment of the indiscriminate murderousness of Bin Laden and his henchmen and the fear of the organization's continued existence pushed aside, if only temporarily, the rigid moral considerations whereby nations that engage in targeted killings, like Israel, are judged. Either way, the debate on these issues is likely to flare up anew if and when the West must deal with the price of the revenge anticipated from Bin Laden's operatives and supporters.

