



## BIN LADEN'S DEMISE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

### Report on an FPRI Briefing

By Tally Helfont

On Wednesday, May 4, FPRI held an impromptu briefing on “Bin Laden's Demise and its Implications,” featuring a diverse group of FPRI scholars, including [Edward Turzanski](#), [Jack Tomarchio](#), [Michael Noonan](#), [Barak Mendelsohn](#), [Stephen Gale](#), [Lawrence Husick](#), [David Danelo](#), [Theodore Friend](#), and [Eric Trager](#), plus two guest scholars -- Sumit Ganguly and Christopher Swift. The briefing was convened and moderated by [Alan Luxenberg](#). To access the audio file of the event, visit: <http://www.fpri.org/multimedia/20110504.fpri.binladen.html>. For essays by Husick and Mendelsohn, see “FPRI Perspectives on Bin Laden's Demise” at <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/201105.fpri.binladen.html>.

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Edward Turzanski, an FPRI scholar with extensive experience in the intelligence community, noted that two main perspectives are coming out of the Obama administration on the heels of Bin Laden's death: the first by CIA director, Leon Panetta, who said that we can indeed expect some sort of retaliation against us in the future; and the second by the president's advisor for homeland security, John Brennan, who said that we can expect al Qaeda to begin engaging in intense infighting because of the lack of popularity of the organization's number two, Ayman al Zawahiri. Turzanski explained that al Qaeda “has suffered tremendously as a brand name” as a result of the *Sahwa* (awakening) Movement in western Anbar Province and of General David Petraeus's successful surge. Bin Laden had, it was widely believed, receded into the background in recent years, becoming more a titular head, who, though certainly an important symbolic figure, was less and less involved in operational planning. He conceded that while a retaliatory attack may come at some point in the future, al Qaeda lacks the organizational cohesion and expertise to strike back at us on the scale of 9/11, at least in the short run. Turzanski concluded by saying that the demise of Bin Laden is “a pretty good thing for us. It does bring some measure of closure for those who lost loved ones on 9/11... and it demonstrates a resolve and an expertise that, quite frankly, people forgot that the United States possesses.”

Barak Mendelsohn, author of *Combating Jihadism* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), argued that the most important thing that we can take away, especially in light of the “Arab Spring,” is how marginal the support al Qaeda and its radical agenda have throughout the Middle East. The fact that “people are going to the streets and demanding freedom and democracy,” he said, amounts to infidelity in Bin Laden's view; for al Qaeda, “democracy is heresy.” Mendelsohn explained that al Qaeda's support was at its peak in 2003, and at that point, it was still able to convince people around the Muslim world of its narrative that an “American crusader attack on Islam” was truly taking place. However, as al Qaeda started killing many Muslims themselves, “the narrative didn't hold anymore.” As such, Iraq and the attacks in Jordan, Pakistan and Indonesia began to devastate al Qaeda's reputation and reduced the appeal of its agenda. The death of Bin Laden not only shattered the myth that he was invincible but also marks the decline of al Qaeda central.

Sumit Ganguly, the Rabindranath Tagore Chair in Indian Cultures and Civilizations and Professor of Political Science at Indiana University – Bloomington, noted that India's reaction to Bin Laden's death was one of incredulity. The Indians had long maintained that there was complicity on the part of Pakistani regimes in protecting Bin Laden, rejecting the notion that he was living in the western borderland of Pakistan in a cave. Ganguly noted that, though it rarely made it to the American press, the Indians maintained that Bin Laden had been on kidney dialysis for some time, necessitating a certain amount of medical infrastructure to survive on a daily basis. In fact, considering India was very adamant about the fact that Bin Laden was in the shelter of various Pakistani elements, there was a certain amount of gloating going on in India, according to Ganguly, over the fact that their assertion had been confirmed. He added that there is “also a kind of sneaking admiration for the manner in which American Special Forces carried out this operation, with such extraordinary skill and dexterity.”

Ganguly asserted that as far as Pakistanis are concerned, it is utterly implausible that they were unaware of Bin Laden's whereabouts, especially since his compound was located barely a few meters from Pakistan's Military Academy. If this were true, it would suggest that the ISI "is either remarkably maladroit and remarkably inept, or they were downright complicit." Pakistani spin doctoring of this revelation as an intelligence failure, he said, "borders between the laughable and the bizarre."

Michael Noonan, the Managing Director of FPRI's Program on National Security Studies, noted that according to open source reporting, the Navy Seals team that killed Bin Laden confiscated five computers, ten hard drives, and over one hundred thumb drives, CDs, and numerous documents, adding that it will be interesting to see how the exploitation of this material contributes to U.S. efforts to take down other key players in al Qaeda. Likewise, preliminary assessments of some of these materials seem to suggest that Bin Laden's role might have in fact been more operational than had been previously thought, contrary to the conventional wisdom within the intelligence community. As far as Afghanistan is concerned, Noonan said, a key thing to watch for is the Pakistani reaction, specifically because there had already been a steady cooling of relations between Pakistan and the United States. Any further deterioration of this relationship could jeopardize our campaign in Afghanistan, considering that the U.S. has been moving a tremendous percentage of its supplies by land across Pakistan. However, Noonan suggested that it may in fact be time for the U.S. to leave Afghanistan, responding not only to Hamid Karzai's own statements along these lines but also to the stalemate that currently exists in negotiation with the Taliban. The 2001 Status of Forces Agreement was very clear about those responsible for the attacks on 9/11, "If we are able to take care of al Qaeda and divorce that from larger issues in Afghanistan... we might as well." Noonan concluded by saying, "refereeing a civil war in Afghanistan is not in our national interest." Taking into account the recent reshuffling that occurred within the Administration involving General Petraeus, Director Panetta, and Secretary Gates along with recent events, "this could very well be the first step in disengaging from Afghanistan."

Theodore Friend, author of *Indonesian Destinies* (Harvard University Press, 2003) and of the forthcoming book *Woman, Man, and God in Modern Islam*, responded to a question on the reaction of the Muslim world to the news of Bin Laden's death by noting that there is no single, unified response. Friend suggested that the Arab uprisings that have occurred throughout Middle East, and more specifically the efforts to throw off the yoke of authoritarian rulers, were fifty years overdue. He expressed his hope that these efforts would continue and flourish, citing the Egyptian example with its strong military establishment in particular. Two aspects that Friend believed are being neglected in analyses of the impact of these events on the region include economics and the role of women. Economically, Turkey's green capitalism (Islamic not ecological) and the economic prosperity it has generated is a development that is underreported but deserves attention, in Friend's view. In regards to women, there remains a lack of progress in Muslim countries, and what Friend referred to as "intentional oppression and theologized diminution of the standing of women and their opportunities." He was saddened to say that, according to his assessment, there is little promise to be seen on this front in the so-called Arab Spring.

Eric Trager, who spent much of the past few months in Egypt working on his doctoral dissertation, suggested that, as indicated by his interviews of senior leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood's Guidance Office as well as its youth movement, there remains a deep hostility towards the United States. Trager said this sentiment was particularly evident in their perceptions of who perpetrated the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, which at best doubted the involvement of Muslims and at worst, believed the entire event to be a fabrication of the United States as an excuse to attack the Muslims. Trager recounted that when asked what the Muslim Brotherhood is for, they responded that the Brotherhood is "for moderate Islam." When asked to elaborate, they qualified, "Well, we are not al Qaeda." Trager explained that while al Qaeda is in fact unpopular in Egypt, the United States is more unpopular in the eyes of the Muslim Brotherhood and the like. This reality is apparent not only in the Brotherhood's statements in response to Bin Laden's killing, but also in many Egyptian dailies like *al Masri al Yom*, which equate the United States with al Qaeda, saying that the U.S. has in fact killed more people in more countries than the latter. Trager commented that these moral equivalencies "crystallize the challenge that America faces in the moving ahead in what may well be the new Middle East." He cautioned that while the uprisings have brought forth a new, liberal, anti-authoritarian set of youth activists; these activists still hold deeply anti-American views.

Christopher Swift, author of the forthcoming book, *The Fighting Vanguard: Local Insurgencies in the Global Jihad* suggested that Bin Laden's death would transform the war on terror without ending it. With the decline of al Qaeda central and its operational capability over the last few years, the emerging threat to U.S. interests comes from two primary sources: the first is from Salafi jihadi syndicates like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), which appears to be adopting more global ambitions; and the second is from global jihadist subsidiaries like al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Both groups are de-territorialized politically, de-localized ideologically, and historically have demonstrated a high level of operational integration with al Qaeda central. It is Swift's sense that the strategic center of what remains of al Qaeda central's global insurgency has already been shifting away from the Afghanistan – Pakistan theater to Saudi Arabia and more importantly, Yemen. Finally, Swift noted that AQAP's "growing prominence within the constellation of contemporary Islamic militant groups may signal an important evolution within the al Qaeda movement itself." Rather than colonizing and co-opting conflicts in distant lands, which, thus far, has been the modus operandi of al Qaeda central, AQAP is operating in its own society. Rather than challenging and usurping the indigenous social and political structures, Swift says, this group has grafted itself onto them. This model is more adaptive, resilient, and produces a more tenacious adversary, something the U.S. should be weary of in the future as it tries to prioritize and distinguish between its various threats and enemies.

Stephen Gale, the Chairman of FPRI's Center on Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism, argued that the impact of Bin Laden's death is not to be measured by the response of leaders of Muslim countries or even of the *ummah*, but rather by the legacy of terrorism, which doesn't require a broad base. The real question, from his point of view, is will this motivate those relatively small groups not just to exact revenge but also to use Bin Laden's death as a rationale for extending the campaign of jihad? Gale noted that from al Qaeda's point of view, September 11th was a failure. He suggested that it is only a matter of time until they plan an event that achieves their goals and that the death of Bin Laden is not going to bring about any transformation in the Middle East, releasing people from the obligation to carry out jihad.

David Danelo, a Marine Corps veteran who served in the Iraq War, stated that in his view, "Bin Laden's death marks the single most significant moral victory that we have achieved thus far in the war on terror." Referencing various other memorable achievements accomplished by the United States, Danelo argued that none compared to victory embodied in this achievement, as illustrated in the triumphant responses of millions of Americans across the country at hearing the news from President Obama. Danelo noted, "There is an open-ended question of how we sustain this narrative of moral victory in the United States." He also suggested that the Obama administration derived a policy dividend from this successful mission, and how it uses this policy dividend will be the question that defines the 2012 upcoming election.

Lawrence Husick, a specialist in technology and terrorism, noted the need for our country, and for the West in general, to reevaluate our grand strategy for security. Husick argued that Bin Laden invented and built al Qaeda by using the expertise he gained in construction and his understanding of supply chains and logistics prior to his radicalization. Bin Laden essentially used his organization "to exert leverage where he could not exert force directly." Husick explained that this, in its essence, is the textbook definition of terrorism. He went on to assert that "Bin Laden was one of the few figures in history, who in fact changed the world and he did so by inventing al Qaeda" and its methods. Today, al Qaeda has metastasized; it has become a brand with franchises but without a central agency. These franchises have taken up the banner and the ideology to the extent that it suits their purposes and are working, according to their own schedule, to strike at us. This is why it is critical that we rework our security strategy, not simply in terms of offense-defense, but also in terms of sustainability and survivability.

Jack Tomarchio, a former deputy undersecretary of intelligence in the Department of Homeland Security, noted that, though al Qaeda's franchises are much more active than al Qaeda central, which has been systematically taken down using drone strikes and other techniques, al Qaeda's number two, Ayman al Zawahiri is still at large, describing his role as being primarily operational and much like that of a chief operating officer. Tomarchio referred to the toppling of the Arab regimes as being a primary goal of al Qaeda, and though this has occurred over the course of only a few weeks, it was for very different reasons and using very different means than envisaged by al Qaeda. The Arab Street was successful where al Qaeda was not. This is telling about al Qaeda's narrative and its lack of compatibility with the demands that motivated the Arab uprisings. However, Tomarchio cautioned that we must remain vigilant and act in a prudent manner moving forward, taking into account that future attacks are likely to be carried out by radicalized individuals both domestically and abroad.

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