



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

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About the CTC Sentinel

The Combating Terrorism Center is an independent educational and research institution based in the Department of Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy, West Point. The CTC Sentinel harnesses the Center's global network of scholars and practitioners to understand and confront contemporary threats posed by terrorism and other forms of political violence.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not of the U.S. Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

Bin Ladin's Killing and its Effect on Al-Qa`ida: What Comes Next?

By Bruce Hoffman



A Pakistani man reads about the death of Usama bin Ladin at a stall in Lahore. - Photo by Arif Ali/AFP/Getty Images

CONFRONTED WITH THE sudden death of a leader, terrorist groups become cornered animals. When wounded, they lash out. Not only in hopes of surviving, but also to demonstrate their remaining power and continued relevance. Al-Qa`ida is no different. As its statement issued on May 6, 2011 confirming Usama bin Ladin's death declared, "The soldiers of Islam, groups and individuals, will continue planning without tiredness or boredom, and without despair or surrender, and without weakness or stagnancy, until they cause the disaster that makes children look like the elderly!"

Al-Qa`ida will thus keen for its leader by killing. It will not necessarily attack soon. Yet the United States should brace itself once the 40-day mourning period that some Muslims observe ends. The

dual prospect of punishing the United States and re-igniting fear and anxiety following a time of celebration and relief must surely figure prominently in al-Qa`ida's calculus. This is what happened in Israel 15 years ago.

Past Decapitation Precedents

On January 5, 1996, Israeli agents assassinated Yahya Ayyash, a senior Hamas field commander whose bomb-making skills earned him the sobriquet the "Engineer." A deceptive quiet then ensued as Hamas licked its wounds and plotted its revenge. Retribution came 40 days later with the first of a series of four bus bombings that continued for two months. By the time the bombings ended, more than 60 people had been killed. This bloody spate of attacks, moreover, is credited with having decisively influenced the outcome of the Israeli general elections that March.

Professor Rohan Gunaratna, Head, International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, Singapore, is the lead author of Pakistan: Ground Zero Terrorism (Reaktion, London, 2011)

No terrorist leader has influenced the contemporary wave of terrorism more than Usama bin Ladin. Bin Ladin built not only al-Qa`ida, “the vanguard of the Islamic movements,” but a global movement. Like a politician, he forged enduring links with different leaders and disparate groups. Unlike his predecessors, he crafted an ideology that has global appeal. Muslims suffering from perceived and real injustices formed his support base. Bin Ladin’s biggest strength was his ability to communicate complex ideas into simple words. A master communicator, he was able to politicize, radicalize and mobilize a segment of the Muslim community globally to hate America, its European allies and friends. As his soft spoken words met with his destructive actions, he captured the imagination of resentful Muslims worldwide.

Within al-Qa`ida, Bin Ladin groomed a highly capable leadership that has been running its day-to-day affairs. Although U.S.-led global counterterrorism efforts steadfastly eroded al-Qa`ida’s capabilities, Bin Ladin was able to maintain the spirit of his followers and motivation of his fighters. Of the leaders of the six committees of al-Qa`ida, only Bin Ladin, who led the Political Committee, and Ayman al-Zawahiri, who led the Information Committee, survived. While the heads of the military committee Abu Hafs al-Masri and administration and finance committee Shaykh Saeed were killed in Afghanistan and Pakistan respectively, the heads of the religious committee Abu Hafs al-Mauritani, and security and intelligence committee Sayf al-Adl were captured in Iran. Bin Ladin’s deputy and his personal physician, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was his designated successor. While al-Qa`ida’s numerical strength is estimated at a few hundred fighters mostly located in North Waziristan Agency in Pakistan, an estimated several million Muslims worldwide still support Bin Ladin.

Reducing the future global threat of terrorism will depend on the U.S. ability and willingness to work effectively in the Muslim world. Although Pakistan was the steadfast sponsor of the Taliban, after 9/11 the government of Pakistan provided unprecedented support to the United States. More than 600 al-Qa`ida leaders and members were killed or captured in Pakistan. After the U.S.-led coalition intervention in Afghanistan in October 2001, Pakistan inherited a huge terrorist infrastructure that previously flourished in Afghanistan. Both the location of the residences of Bin Ladin (Abbottabad, north of Islamabad) and Khalid Shaykh Muhammad (West Ridge, Rawalpindi) demonstrates that the threat has spread from tribal Pakistan to mainland Pakistan. Rather than criticize Pakistan, it is paramount for the United States to continue to work with their Pakistani intelligence, law enforcement and military counterparts. In addition to working with Pakistan to dismantle both the physical and the conceptual infrastructures of

terrorism and extremism in Pakistan, the United States should help Islamabad develop the economy of Pakistan, especially in the tribal areas.

Until al-Qa`ida attacked America's most iconic landmarks on 9/11, Bin Ladin sustained and survived due to international neglect. He should have been killed or captured immediately after al-Qa`ida attacked the U.S. embassies in Africa in 1998 or the USS *Cole* in 2000. The killing of Bin Ladin is an emotional victory for the United States, its allies and its friends. Had the United States killed Bin Ladin in Afghanistan before or immediately after 9/11, the United States would have deterred an escalation in global threat. Had the United States not been distracted and intervened in Iraq, Bin Ladin would have been killed or captured much earlier. Both al-Qa`ida and the wider, global movement Bin Ladin built is likely to pose an enduring threat in the foreseeable future.

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