

Opinion

Is bin Laden's death a new beginning? What it means for global security, for Pakistan and for Muslim extremism



Richard Kemp

He said people prefer a strong horse. Well, the US is just that, and al-Qaeda is limping

The killing of bin Laden represents what Churchill would have called a “climacteric” — an intense turning point — in the War on Terror. Not because it will have a significant impact on the terrorist operations of al-Qaeda and its international jihadist followers: it won't — except perhaps to provoke a series of short-term revenge attempts for which we must brace ourselves.

Not since his ejection from Afghanistan in 2001 has bin Laden exercised any effective form of hands-on operational control over the networks — although he was clearly kept in the loop or there would have been no need for couriers such as the one that led US Special Forces to his

hide-out. Instead, top-level command has been vested in his Egyptian deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Day-to-day planning and co-ordination, even of international strikes, has long been delegated to local cells and groupings such as those in the Arabian Peninsula, the Islamic Maghreb and the brutally effective one in Iraq.

The key to understanding the impact of bin Laden's death lies in his own blunt analysis of American power to a gathering of jihadists celebrating the 9/11 attacks: “When people see a strong horse and a weak horse, by nature they will like the strong horse.” People have now seen a strong horse: it is US intelligence and surveillance penetration of al-Qaeda's most valued and best-protected possession. And American willingness to strike into the heart of a foreign country, with or without permission, in pursuit of the man who killed 3,000 of its citizens.

People have also seen a weak horse: a man who postured as a harsh-living soldier, in the image of the great Muslim warriors of history, but met his end as he was born, in the luxurious surroundings of an expensive villa in a well-to-do suburb. Killed by his hubristic sense of personal entitlement and a certainty that, protected by his loyal supporters among the Pakistani authorities, he would remain safe from his clod-hopping American pursuers.

This is only the latest — if highly significant — sight we have had of a



Ayman al-Zawahiri has pleaded for his apocalyptic but unpopular vision

limping al-Qaeda horse. For at least three years al-Zawahiri has been forced to plead for his movement's apocalyptic agenda in the face of an increasing number of once-loyal Islamist clerics horrified at the organisation's butchery of thousands of Muslims around the globe.

Its leadership has suffered crippling damage from US Predator strikes in the Pakistani border areas and has proven unable to effectively retaliate,

as security services around the globe, including in the Arab world, ganged up against it.

Perhaps most tellingly, the hobbling jihadist animal has consistently been at the back of the field in the recent Middle East revolutionary stakes. Bin Laden accurately predicted the downfall of the Arab world's corrupt regimes. But his own autocratic and privileged background, combined with a relentlessly backward-looking vision, left him blind to the possibility that ordinary people might risk their lives for concepts as tenuous as democracy and freedom. In bin Laden's eyes such people would be directed — by him — to give up their lives in the name of fundamentalist Islam. Al-Zawahiri's baleful attempts to gain some credit for what is happening in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and elsewhere have convinced no one.

Despite all of this, al-Qaeda and its followers in Yemen, North Africa and Somalia continue to present a grave danger. We do not know how much sway extremist groups with violent anti-Western agendas will gain in states such as Egypt, Libya and Syria. Even after bin Laden, there remains no doubt that a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan would again become a refuge and launch-pad for al-Qaeda jihadists intent on attacking the West.

But there is a risk that Western decision-makers, facing overwhelming demands on resources, will see the

death of bin Laden as an excuse to scale back on intelligence, security and military resources for the War on Terror. That would be fatal. We must relentlessly suppress extremist groups, preferably by supporting indigenous government forces, but if necessary by direct intervention. If we capitalise on bin Laden's death and continue to expose al-Qaeda's weakness, more and more of its supporters and would-be supporters will turn their backs, if not on his vision for a fundamentalist Islamic world, then perhaps on his violent methods for bringing it about.

After many promising leads, false trails, near-misses and dead ends in a ten-year manhunt, the much-quoted Taliban boast that “the West has all the watches but we have all the time” was turned around as the hours ran out for Osama bin Laden. Now the clock is ticking for Ayman al-Zawahiri, whose own end cannot be far off.

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Did Pakistan help the US? Behind the scenes, the truth really matters



Anatol Lieven

Osama bin Laden may have chosen Abbottabad for its climate. After all, that was one reason why Major James Abbott chose the place in 1853 as the British administrative centre to govern the newly conquered population of the Hazara district, and as a military base to guard against Pashtun tribesmen and Islamist extremists to the north.

For bin Laden was not the first anti-Western Islamist leader to base himself in these hills. In the 1820s, Syed Ahmad Barelvi, a radical Muslim from British India, moved there to lead a jihad against the British and Sikh rulers of Punjab. Betrayed by his local followers, he was killed in battle, but his memory remains an inspiration for jihadis in Pakistan and beyond.

It was Abbottabad's climate and its wooded hills that also attracted Pakistani's military institutions, including the elite academy a few hundred yards from where bin Laden was killed. This presence raises the key questions about bin Laden's death: did Pakistan's military intelligence service (the ISI) know that bin Laden — or some big terrorist figure — was hiding in that house? And if so, did they help to tip off the US?

After all, in late January, Pakistani intelligence arrested Umar Patek, a leader of an Indonesian terrorist group affiliated to al-Qaeda, in Abbottabad. The Pakistani authorities later announced that they had been led to

Patek by a local al-Qaeda facilitator, Tahir Shahzad, who worked for the Pakistani postal service in the town. Either Shahzad or Patek may in turn have led to bin Laden. Given all this activity, it seems inconceivable that the Pakistani military did not receive some warning of the raid, even if only at the last moment.

Credible details about Pakistan's role may emerge in leaks from Washington over the coming weeks and months, but are very unlikely to come from Pakistani sources. This is because Pakistan has been playing, not a two-faced, but a four-faced role when dealing with extremism.

The first pair of faces concerns the role of the US. As revealed by WikiLeaks, the Pakistani Government publicly condemned US drone attacks on Taliban and al-Qaeda targets in Pakistan's tribal areas while welcoming them in private

Pakistan has been playing a four-faced role, not a two-faced one

conversations with US officials. The reason is that the drone campaign is detested by the Pakistani public but welcomed by the Government and army commanders because it has killed many of their enemies.

This balance was disturbed in recent months by a dramatic increase in the number of CIA operatives in Pakistan, and especially the action of one of them, Raymond Davis, in killing two civilians in Lahore in January. This and a US drone attack in March that killed a particularly large number of civilians led to Pakistan curtailing co-operation with the US until the wave of agents was withdrawn.

But the basic security relationship with the US remained unchanged. This is founded on the second pair of Pakistani faces: the soft face that the military and the ISI turn towards the Afghan Taliban, and the hard one that they turn towards international terrorists. The top leadership of the Afghan Taliban has been granted shelter, if not support, in northern Baluchistan, and the US has desisted from using drones to attack the region to kill Mullah Omar and his chief lieutenants.

The US has only done this because it is reasonably pleased with Pakistan's performance in regard to international terrorism. A number of al-Qaeda operatives have been arrested in Pakistan, including, most significantly, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. Pakistani intelligence has also helped fellow Muslim countries in their fight against terrorism.

It is obvious why Pakistan would want the US to be responsible for killing Osama bin Laden. For them to have killed or captured him would have been a hideous embarrassment that would have infuriated ordinary Pakistanis — most of whom believe that 9/11 was a CIA/Mossad plot.

In public, both countries are talking of general co-operation while being vague on the detail. But behind the scenes, the truth really matters. If the Pakistanis did give help in tracking down bin Laden, then this will create genuine gratitude in Washington. If, on the other hand, US intelligence believes that the ISI knew of bin Laden's presence but said nothing, this would be a truly dreadful blow to US-Pakistani relations. We will learn more in the coming months — but not on the record.

Anatol Lieven's book, Pakistan: a Hard Country, is published this week



Maajid Nawaz

The jihadis have a new martyr, but the Arab Spring offers a better message

Since the news of Osama bin Laden's death, I have been taking myself back to my twenties, when I was a leader of a global Islamist organisation. How would I have reacted to this news?

For bin Laden's most committed followers, a sense of sorrow will lead to anger and the desire for revenge. Scenes of jubilation in the US will only spur them further. They will beatify his achievements in life, hail him a martyr in death and rush to find an alternative source of inspiration.

While Ayman al-Zawahiri is expected to remain in control of al-Qaeda's operations, many believe that without bin Laden, al-Qaeda will lack a unifying and symbolic leader. This may not be true. Anwar al-Awlaki, the Yemeni American extremist, has been positioning himself to fill bin Laden's role. History is replete with examples of a symbolic death of a leader kickstarting a cause.

In his life, bin Laden achieved what very few people ever manage. He popularised a narrative, franchised a cause and inspired thousands. In this sense he will remain more than just one man. His true death will only come with the death of his movement, and only a competing phenomenon

can achieve this. Luckily, we have one: the Arab Spring has also popularised a narrative, franchised a cause and inspired thousands of young Muslims.

The real opportunity now lies not in dissuading die-hard al-Qaeda followers to leave the cause, but in deterring a new generation of recruits from joining, by presenting the Arab Spring as an alternative to bin Laden's brand of death. Our collective challenge is to make the most of the dormant potential within the Arab Spring to make Islamism appear as unfashionable as Soviet Communism has become. Before the Arab uprisings, this would have seemed impossible, but the political upheavals across the region have made it a realistic goal.

Historically, organised Islamists, whether violent or not, were able to present themselves as the only credible voice of the “Muslim street”. Added to this was al-Qaeda's own insistence that change could only come through violence and that the West would never help Muslims remove their corrupt rulers. These were serious obstacles to creating a peaceful alternative message.

But the Arab Spring has severely dented the credibility of this line. Rather than being organised by them, the uprisings caught Islamists off guard; they showed that rulers could be removed by people power rather than by violence and that the international community was willing to help achieve this. (However, we should be concerned at the way the better-organised Islamist groups have begun to step into the fray in north Africa, to lay claim to what was not initially theirs.)

The opportunity to dent the appeal of bin Laden's theory of change using the achievements of Arabs must not be missed. Let the real work in inspiring a new narrative now begin.

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