

After Osama bin Laden: Is there a Future for Al Qaeda?

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RASHMI SINGH, JUL 12 2011

Things have been looking up for the United States and its allies in the Global War on Terror (or Overseas Contingency Operations if you prefer) in the past few months – or so we are led to believe. To begin with the self-immolation of a modest Tunisian street vendor, Muhammad Bouazizi, in December 2010 triggered widespread protests in Tunisia and rapidly spread to other countries across the Middle East and North Africa. This so-called *Arab Spring* has generated a wave of optimism with many viewing it as the most profound democratic transformation wrought in the Arab world in several decades.

A number of people also believed that in providing populations with an unprecedented opportunity for legitimate political expression the Arab Spring has also effectively undermined Al Qaeda's (AQ's) grip on the Middle East and North Africa. Indeed, the protests made it patently obvious that Osama bin Laden's particular brand of radical Islam was utterly unimportant for populations in the region. Further bolstering this optimism was the news of bin Laden's demise in early May as American Navy Seals located and 'liquidated' him in a high-walled compound in the Pakistani city of Abbotabad, embarrassingly close to the country's premier military academy.

It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that expert commentators and lay people alike are questioning whether this fortuitous combination of events essentially heralds the end of Al Qaeda and its ideology. However, as many have stated before, the notion that bin Laden's death and the Arab Spring have somehow defeated Al Qaeda is both simplistic and somewhat misleading. Why?

First, those that believe that the popular uprisings and bin Laden's death have weakened Al Qaeda's grip on the Arab psyche presuppose that it exercised such a grip in the first place. This is problematic not only because it paints the entire population of a vast and diverse region as implicit or explicit supporters and sympathisers of AQ but also because it misrepresents the true nature of Al Qaeda today. Al Qaeda must be understood not only as the core group lead by bin Laden and his long-standing second-in-command (and now AQ head) Ayman al-Zawahiri, but also as a 'network' of multiple affiliated groups with links to AQ's core and finally, and possibly most problematically, an ideology with its core component being a global jihad waged with the intention of re-forging the Islamic Caliphate. Bin Laden's death impacts each of these constituent elements.

With regard to the core, evidence clearly reveals that bin Laden was much more than the symbolic figurehead of Al Qaeda that many had suggested he had become in recent years. He continued to be involved in operational planning and played a key role in determining the strategic future of the organisation. In this regard, his death has dealt both a symbolic and strategic blow to the core. At the same time, the time-lapse between bin Laden's death and the announcement formally proclaiming Zawahiri as the new emir also suggests that there may be a degree of in-fighting within the group at worst and a lack of confidence in Zawahiri's ability to lead at best. Undoubtedly, bin Laden was a charismatic leader who was able to hold the core, with its predominantly Saudi, Libyan and Egyptian factions, together in a manner that might not be as easy for the ageing and ponderous Zawahiri. Indeed, unless Zawahiri can step up to the challenge this would result in the core fracturing as factions pull in different directions.

What about AQ's affiliates? Well for one, it is significant to note that although individual Al Qaeda figures affiliated with other groups have praised the decision to appoint Zawahiri as the emir after bin Laden, none but Somalia's al-Shabaab has thus far publically stated its support as a group. This may not only suggest a lack of enthusiasm for the

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new emir amongst the network but also a growing distance between stronger affiliates and the core group. For bin Laden, decentralisation was a key strategy and he saw Al Qaeda as an umbrella organisation that brought together and channelised the activities and abilities of multiple like-minded organisations across the globe. However, over time AQ's regional affiliates have moved away from the core's aims and concerns to prioritise their own local agendas. Key affiliates, such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb are largely independent of the core leadership and only nominally allied with it. In such circumstances, the demise of the charismatic bin Laden may mean that this far-flung and loosely allied network fragments even more quickly than the core.

This brings us to what will be in all likelihood both bin Laden's and the core's most tenacious legacy, i.e. AQ's ideology. The manner in which AQ-affiliates across the Middle East and Pakistan have incorporated this ideology into their own local agendas and used it to acquire both greater legitimacy, and in several cases new global ambitions, suggests that this may well be the long-term future of AQ. As the Arab Spring has demonstrated the Islamic Caliphate is certainly not what the people desire. Yet if local grievances remain unresolved, as they are likely to, we will possibly face a future where multiple organisations, both historically affiliated with the core and otherwise, will use Al Qaeda's ideology and its rhetoric of global jihad to wage wars and promote terror in the name of a more equitable and peaceful future.

At the same time, it would not be far-fetched to argue that this would have been the future of Al Qaeda with or without bin Laden's death and indeed, all his demise may have done is hasten the process. Indeed, what seems to be most clear is that Osama bin Laden and his legacy will continue to haunt us from beyond the grave for some time yet.

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