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Osama bin Laden is Dead

By Rohan Gunaratna

Synopsis

Now that Osama bin Laden is dead, the big question to ask is whether global terrorism will die with him. What did bin Laden leave behind?

Commentary

OSAMA bin Laden influenced the contemporary wave of global terrorism more than any other terrorist figure. While his own group Al Qaeda spearheaded the most devastating attacks, bin Laden built a global terror network by bringing together like-minded groups from conflict zones in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Both operationally and ideologically, Al Qaeda influenced insurgent and terrorist groups and spawned a movement that will outlive its founder and leader.

For three decades straddling two centuries, bin Laden played a significant role in globalising terrorism. In the Muslim world, he played the most decisive role in spreading the tactic of suicide terrorism. Having conducted mass fatality attacks against the United States, bin Laden provoked the US, its allies and friends to intervene in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Bin Laden's Ideology

Although puritanical in his belief, bin Laden also harnessed modern communications platforms to politicise, radicalise and mobilise millions of supporters and sympathisers. Most importantly, he crafted an ideology of deep hatred against the West. He could communicate complex messages in simple words. Speaking softly with a Quran in one hand and an AK47 in the other, he built mass appeal across the Muslim world.

As the unofficial representative of the Saudi kingdom, bin Laden travelled to Pakistan in 1980 to support the decade-long anti-Soviet multinational Afghan mujahiddin campaign. Having distinguished himself as the leader of the Arab mujahiddin, bin Laden drew support from a cadre of participants and supporters that fought in Muslim conflict zones. After a dispute with the Saudi regime over basing US troops in Saudi Arabia, he directed terrorist attacks against the Saudi regime. However, his prime target was the US. To fight US-supported Muslim regimes, bin Laden created a dozen camps for training young Muslim fighters in Sudan from 1991 to 1996 and in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001.

After Al Qaeda's deadly attacks on the US on 11 September 2001, bin Laden directed most of his firepower in the global south, mostly in the Muslim world. Riding on the success of 9/11, Al Qaeda inspired and instigated two dozen groups it had ideologised, trained and financed to emulate Al Qaeda tactics. With the increasing difficulty of attacking the US, Europe and Australia, Al Qaeda attacked Western targets in the global south.

However, more Muslims have been killed, maimed and injured in Al Qaeda-directed and inspired operations and in conflict zones. In the face of criticism, bin Laden and his fellow ideologues argued that if a good Muslim got killed by accident, he would go to heaven.

Bin Laden's Influence in Southeast Asia

Among the terrorist groups in Southeast Asia trained and financed by Al Qaeda was Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). Led by Abubakar Ba'asyir, an Indonesian radical cleric, JI killed 202 innocent people, including 88 Australians, in Bali on October 12, 2002. Almost all the JI leaders who planned and prepared the Bali attack as well as the dozen other attacks staged in Indonesia were indoctrinated and trained by Al Qaeda. After the Bali attack, the Australian government built an offshore counter terrorism capacity in Indonesia and in the Philippines to fight Al Qaeda-associated groups such as JI and the Abu Sayyaf Group. As JI was particularly close to Al Qaeda, both bin Laden and his associates threatened Australia for its role that gave a significant capacity to governments in the region to fight terrorism.

The threat posed by Al Qaeda and its associated groups is likely to persist. Bin Laden called for the creation of Islamic states wherever Muslims lived. Furthermore, his attack invited retaliation from the Western world. As the Western governments reacted rather than responded to the threat of terrorism, especially the US invasion of Iraq, more Muslims were radicalised than ever. In addition to sustaining two dozen groups, bin Laden has crafted an ideology that finds resonance in the Muslim world, especially in conflict zones. As there are conflicts in more than a dozen Muslim countries where Al Qaeda's message finds resonance, the threat of ideological extremism and terrorism will continue.

Bin Laden's Successor?

Bin Laden appointed Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian medical doctor as his successor. The former leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, al-Zawahiri was head of the information committee of Al Qaeda. His book, *The Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*, formed the blueprint for al Qaeda strategy. His wife and two children were killed in the US bombing of the Tora Bora mountains. Although hardworking and bright, al-Zawahiri lacks the global charisma and appeal of bin Laden. Although Al Qaeda is likely to seek revenge on Pakistan and the US for killing its leader, its strategy and tactics are unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Bin Laden will remain a hero for his followers and supporters. He will be memorialised and a few groups will carry out attacks in his name.

Bin Laden became such a prominent figure because of his ability and willingness to work together with disparate leaders and groups from different parts of the world. His key strength was to mount a few spectacular attacks, mobilise like-minded groups to join him and to galvanise public support for a sustained campaign.

Contrary to popular belief, he was not only a spiritual leader. He was an operational leader that actively planned and prepared attacks. He worked very closely with Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks. However, after 9/11, the security environment forced him to play a low-profile role. Nonetheless, through the release of audio and video tapes, he played a vital role in shaping the threat environment.

Although bin Laden is dead, he has unleashed a potent ideology that will continue to politicise, radicalise and mobilise a tiny segment of the global Muslim population. It was important for the US and Pakistani forces to kill or capture him. It was the least they could do for a terrorist leader who had inflicted so much suffering and pain among tens of thousands of civilians and security forces personnel. His death has sent a powerful message that he was a mortal and that God was not on his side.

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