

## **Long list of woes awaits the next emir of al-Qaeda**

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The Age

4 May 2011

P. 19

While the death of Osama bin Laden will be greatly welcomed across much of the world, this is not the beginning of the end for al-Qaeda. That occurred once they attacked the United States on September 11, 2001. From that time on, the weight of the US and its allies' military and intelligence resources were brought to bear. And, while the organisation founded by bin Laden has been able to launch or inspire several attacks against Western targets, it has not come close to replicating the carnage it inflicted in 2001.

There will always be conjecture about how much earlier bin Laden could have been killed or captured. His early escape from Afghanistan through a permeable cordon around Tora Bora did not augur well, while the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq shifted resources away from the hunt for bin Laden for years. But throughout the frustrating years, pressure was able to be exerted that forced al-Qaeda's senior leadership on the defensive, making it concentrate on survival rather than operational planning.

For those optimistic enough to proclaim the battle won with the death of bin Laden, it should be noted that for all their ideological rigidity, his close followers have been able to exhibit an impressive degree of operational pragmatism when required.

The al-Qaeda senior leadership understood the tenuous nature of its existence and had long ago sought to ensure its long-term survival through franchising its activities. North Africa, the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula remain areas where it has sought to consolidate its operational presence.

Last week's bombing in Morocco reminds us of the continuing operational ability of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, while Yemen's inability to exercise government control throughout its territory has allowed al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to flourish.

These groups are nearly entirely self-sufficient, so bin Laden's death will have little impact other than to remind them of their own mortality.

Who leads al-Qaeda central after bin Laden will occupy much of the future analytical work of intelligence agencies. But whoever does succeed to the leadership will have an unenviable task; trying to maintain the relevance of the organisation to its current franchisees, at the same time as reaching out to others to join, finding donors willing to provide it with funds to allow it to operate, and trying to assert the senior leadership's authority now that its founder and figurehead has been killed.

First, though, they will need to determine how bin Laden was tracked down to ensure the security of the rest of the leadership has not been compromised.

Adding to the list of woes of the next emir of al-Qaeda is the attrition of many of their middle-ranking and senior leadership over the past 18 months in relentless Predator strikes in Pakistan's tribal areas. And while al-Qaeda has been able to replace them, the pool of talented and experienced terrorists has been growing smaller. The death of bin Laden will thus mean that his replacement will have a much smaller and less capable leadership group with which to rebuild.

Regardless of who succeeds bin Laden, there is no doubt his death is a significant victory for the US and President Barack Obama. Symbolically, it closes a chapter for the US by showing that the most powerful military nation in the world was able to play the long game and was not denied revenge against its attacker.

The death of bin Laden at the hands of US ground forces and the recovery of his body bestow a sense of satisfaction to most Americans that his death from natural causes would not, while a ground

attack rather than aerial strike ensures that conspiracy theorists have little credibility in denying his death.

For Obama, his direction to place bin Laden at the top of his intelligence priority list has reaped rewards in his first term in office, strengthening his national security credentials.

There will probably be some regional ramifications, although bin Laden had lost any support he may have had once he attacked New York and Washington.

While Pakistan still has members of the al-Qaeda leadership operating in its territory, bin Laden's death will remove an irritant in the broader US-Pakistani relationship. We will never know what role, if any, Pakistan's security services played in bin Laden's death, but the event will nevertheless allow for a public display of unanimity between Washington and Islamabad.

The event may also have a more than useful demonstration effect. The Arab world is experiencing its most tumultuous period of political upheaval in generations, and the US has largely had to react to events whose outcomes remain unclear.

Other political leaders are sure to note the US's persistence in pursuing and killing bin Laden after nearly a decade of trying. As a consequence, new governments in countries such as Yemen may be more active in co-operating with Washington to deny al-Qaeda safe operating environments.

Osama bin Laden's death is not the end of al-Qaeda, nor is it the beginning of the end. Rather, it is the end of one chapter of the battle against the organisation. For the US, though, there are many upsides to his death and no downsides. And in counter-terrorism, that is a rare achievement.

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