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The death of Osama Bin Laden – what implications for international security?

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Now that the dust has somewhat settled after the initial euphoria, triumphalism, gloating, and relief that followed Barack Obama's announcement of the death of Osama Bin Laden, more sober analysis is beginning of the broader implications of the end of a 15-year manhunt.

Perhaps foremost on people's minds is the question whether this spells the end of al-Qaeda or even of international terrorism more generally. In the short-term, the answer is most certainly not. Not only is al-Qaeda's terrorist network relatively independent, in operational terms, from hierarchical command and control structures but it is also difficult to imagine that the organisation's strategists and its followers – whether they are actually 'connected' or simply activists buying into al-Qaeda's agenda – did not have some contingency plans in place for the post-Bin Laden period. Thus, a short-term increase in terrorist activity is highly likely, but this does not necessarily need to result in more (successful) attacks. In the long-term, there is greater uncertainty about the future of al-Qaeda and the terrorism it inspires, but also cause for some measured optimism. None of the people around Bin Laden have the same charismatic appeal that he did, and it is not even clear that any 'succession plans' existed. Thus, a succession crisis at the centre is possible, as is a resultant split in the organisation and a consequent weakening of its capabilities.

Historically related to the fight against al-Qaeda, the war in Afghanistan will be affected in two ways. The first impact is that Bin Laden's death will increase the pressure on ending Western military engagement there, disregarding the fact that it is the Taliban, rather than al-Qaeda, against whom the NATO-led forces and the Afghan government have been struggling for a decade now. The second impact is related to the situation in Pakistan. That Bin Laden was hiding out there, has given more credence to claims, espoused among others by Afghan president Hamid Karzai, that Afghanistan's problems are all of Pakistan's making and that Western strategy in Afghanistan is misconceived. Clearly, instability in Afghanistan cannot be ended without addressing the chronic lack of will and ability of institutions in Pakistan to contribute their bit, but to imply that a stable Pakistan would mean the end of all of Afghanistan's ills is either naive self-delusion or wilful misrepresentation.

This leads to another problem – what to do with Pakistan. The UK and US approaches here are significantly different. While the US cut Pakistan out from the entire operation, the UK government was immediately keen to emphasise the continued need for engagement with the Pakistani government. In the long-term, such engagement is indispensible. Not only is Pakistan at long last making some progress towards a more democratic society but the nation has also paid a high price to contribute to the global fight against terrorism. There have, no doubt, been serious shortcomings on the Pakistani side, and these should be named and addressed, but the fight against al-Qaeda and, in particular, against the Taliban cannot be won without Pakistan. India's reaction, branding Pakistan a home of various terrorist groups and implying that at least some of them are knowingly tolerated if not supported, may not be that far from the truth, but is perhaps not vastly helpful.

A final issue is the impact of Bin Laden's death on the 'Arab spring'. Contrary to proclamations by the likes of Muammar Gadhafi of Libya and Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen, al-Qaeda is not the driving force behind uprisings against their (and others') regimes. Yet, at the same time, it may well profit from the stand-offs. In Yemen, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is well-entrenched and has acquired capabilities of global reach, manifesting themselves in the organisation's involvement in various international terrorist plots over the past few years. In the Maghreb, a protracted civil war in Libya may well give al-Qaeda affiliates there opportunities to establish another base, while fully free and fair elections may eventually result in governments more sympathetic to al-Qaeda's narrative if not its tactics. Hamas's mourning of Bin Laden may be an ominous sign in this respect, and clearly one which would pose yet another threat to an anyway fragile Middle East peace process. The, somewhat, pessimistic bottom line is thus: that al-Qaeda as an organisation has grown far beyond the man himself which limits, potentially, the positive impetus that can be gained from his death for the fight against international terrorism.

Yet, overall, there is no reason for defeatism: Osama Bin Laden's death is a significant, if perhaps mostly symbolic, achievement in the fight against international terrorism. It does not spell the end of al-Qaeda, but it demonstrates that Western skill and determination can prevail; skill and determination that are ultimately born of a more humane vision of the world as a whole and one that is therefore vastly superior to the al-Qaeda narrative.

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