

## **Has the Demise of Osama bin Laden Put an End to the Threat from Al Qaeda Central?**

The death of Osama bin Laden as part of Operation Geronimo was greeted across the Western world as symbol of American prowess at delivering justice for the families of the victims of 9/11. However, the real effect of his death on the ability of Al Qaeda to carry out terrorism is highly questionable. Furthermore, if such an organisation actually exists is open to debate. In order to ascertain the impact of bin Laden's death this paper will begin by examining the role and development of bin Laden within the Islamic militancy movement from an ideological perspective, before looking at Al Qaeda. With a clearer understanding of bin Laden's goals the nature of the threat posed and the impact of Ayman al-Zawahiri can be identified.

Throughout this paper it is important to remember that Al Qaeda and the War on Terror is big business (Gerges 2011). It is directly in the interests of the terrorism industry that has evolved in the West to talk up the threats posed and, furthermore, it also suits Osama bin Laden and other Islamic militants to appear more threatening than they actually are (Mueller 2006). The United States is the centre of gravity around which Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden operate so it is the effect of the terror threat from them, and the responses of the US that this paper will focus on.

Under Barack Obama the US has shifted from an ill-defined global War on Terror, with American troops engaged in counter-insurgency operations, to a more concise targeting of Al Qaeda, their command and control structures, and specifically its leadership (Stevenson 2011 and Dormandy 2013). Furthermore, the death of bin Laden has allowed Obama to throw off the neo-conservative shackles that have impaired his first-term and allow his non-interventionist, domestic focused policies to be adopted which will subsequently lessen the US footprint on the Muslim world (Bolton 2013 and Stevenson 2011). This is a crucial aspect for a long-term solution to the problem as it must be realised that destroying Al Qaeda will not remove the theological and ideological roots of Islamic militancy based on Wahhabi-Salafism; only Muslims themselves can do that (McCabe 2010).

In order to examine the role of Osama bin Laden and his importance to not just Al Qaeda but within the militant Islamic movement, we need to look at the origins of his views and his development into a transnational jihadist. Furthermore, this will place emphasis on the personal relationship that he formed during the course of his life that have gone on to be exhibited in the Al Qaeda affiliate

network, and also means that it is much harder for someone other than bin Laden to assume control of the network.

The origins of bin Laden's beliefs can be traced back to his youth, along with the personal ties that this brought. With his father's success and patronage from the House of Saud he grew up in a privileged position with Saudi princes and was thus exposed to the Wahhabite circles of power from an early age (Kepel 2006). Furthermore, many of these acquaintances from his youth would go on to join him in Afghanistan in the battle against the Red Army, in what became almost a rite of passage for young affluent Saudi males (Kepel 2006). Perhaps the most significant factor in bin Laden's education in Wahhabi-Salafism comes from his period at University, where he was heavily influenced by Mohammed Qutb, brother of Sayyid Qutb, and Abdullah Azzam. It is the views and beliefs of these two individuals which we will now turn to in order to further our understanding of the development of bin Laden's politics.

Sayyid Qutb has been described as the founding father of the jihad movement, the 'philosopher of terror' (Gerges 2011: 31). Furthermore, his views are compatible with an eternal jihad as his invocation of *takfir* makes it almost impossible to differentiate between friend and foe over a prolonged period (Brahimi 2010 and Gerges 2005). He is viewed as deep moralist, with a profound sense of Qu'ranic social justice, which is further reinforced by distinct anti-Western views, stemming from the Allies conduct in Egypt during World War II (Musallam 2005). His anti-Western tendencies became more pronounced following Truman's decision to support the Jewish immigration into Palestine, which he claimed uncovered the true conscience of the United States and illustrated the materialistic nature of the civilisation and the imbalance created by their technological innovations (Musallam 2005). The simplistic view purported by many in the West follows this unbroken line from Qutb through bin Laden and into Al Qaeda, a viewpoint that Al Qaeda are quite happy as it endorses their legitimacy as the vanguard of the ummah (Gerges 2011). Reality is slightly different as bin Laden and Zawahiri twisted Qutb's views to suit their own purpose, as Qutb did not call for confrontation with the West, but rather he was an archetypal Near Enemy proponent in that Muslims should 'defend *dar al-Islam* against crusading intentions and cultural invasion' (Gerges 2011: 32).

Abdullah Azzam was cut from a similar cloth to Qutb. This can be clearly seen from the fatwa's issued during the conflict to drive the Soviet's from Afghanistan advocating defensive jihad (Gerges 2006 and Sageman 2004). His links with bin Laden are much more direct than Qutb's. Following their initial meeting at University, where Azzam lectured bin Laden they became reacquainted in Afghanistan between 1982 and 1984, where he was heading up the Bureau of Services, and helped

bin Laden to establish a guest house for jihadists for the purpose of attracting and organising volunteers (Kepel 2006). It should be noted that at this time both bin Laden and Azzam were supported by the Saudi's and the United States and that they were far from being viewed as radical. Despite being the effective leader of the Mujahedeen it is clear that Azzam perceived their future role as being something akin to a reaction force that could assist Muslims around the globe, not as a transnational jihadist movement to go after the near or far enemy (Gerges 2006). However, by the time Azzam was assassinated in a 1989 car bomb Saudi authorities did have doubts about his motivations, and considered him unpredictable (Kepel 2006). Whilst it is not known who was ultimately responsible for his death there was a significant doctrinal dispute going on between Azzam and Zawahiri over the issue of engaging Muslim governments (Sageman 2004). Indeed it is argued by Azzam that 'violence should not be used against Muslim regimes no matter how far they had deviated from *shariah* principles' (Atwan 2006: 74). With this dispute in mind it should be remembered that the single biggest beneficiary from the death of Azzam was bin Laden who gained control of the Bureau of Services and thus the Mujahedeen (Gerges 2006).

From looking at Qutb and Azzam we can see that their doctrine is one of deep rooted principle that believes in the traditional role of jihadists taking up armed struggle in order to defend the ummah from the imposition of occupied rule. The transformation of bin Laden into a transnational terrorist is perhaps surprising, and whilst a definite cause is not known and there are likely to be a multitude of factors, the permanent garrisoning of US troops in Saudi Arabia as part of the 1991 Gulf War is the most significant.

Saddam's invasion of Kuwait gave the Mujahedeen and bin Laden the opportunity to fulfil Azzam's ideology of a Muslim reactionary force. Bin Laden offered to bring the Mujahedeen to help defend the Saudi frontier against the apostate leader of Iraq, and it is only when King Fahd accepted United States troops onto Saudi soil that bin Laden became openly vocal of the Saudi regime (Kepel 2006). This led to the Saudi regime harassing him and he ultimately fled via Pakistan and Afghanistan to Sudan, where thousands of ex-jihadis and radicals had gathered, with a series of Popular Islamic and Arab conferences being held in Khartoum (Kepel 2006).

In a sense these early years of bin Laden's involvement with the Mujahedeen and his fall out with the Saudi's is not that contested, but once he arrives in Sudan the exact nature of his role within militant Islam is much harder to pin down. This has helped to build up the mystic surrounding bin Laden as the arguments over whether he was a symbolic figurehead of an ideological movement or the de facto head of a global terror network prevail (Rollins 2011). Al Qaeda may be nothing more

than a Western construct in order to benefit domestic agendas, and the pockets of the terrorism industry (Burke 2004, Gerges 2011 and Soherwodi & Khattak 2011).

Trying to pin down exactly what is Al Qaeda is a complex task, as it's commonly misconceived to be a distinct organisation or group (Soherwodi & Khattak 2011). Indeed 'Al Qaeda has become a kind of brand name for anything anti-American' (Kepel 2006: 321). A significant aspect for this comes from the United States needing a clearly defined enemy that can be fought and its leadership brought to justice, its command and control apparatus dismantled, and more importantly the War on Terror can thus have a definitive end game (Burke 2004 and Mueller 2006). Furthermore, bin Laden has been complicit in spreading this myth as it benefits his political ideological goals to do so (Burke 2004). Perhaps the biggest problem is that some Muslims 'insist that Al Qaeda is an American invention, a pretext to intervene in Muslim lands' (Gerges 2011: 16). When we consider that the global jihadi feeds on anti-Western and anti-American hate the complexity of the problem becomes clear (Sageman 2004).

It is asserted by some that Al Qaeda was established as an organisation in 1988 (Jenkins 2012). Though this seems to be largely hindsight as we have already seen that in this era bin Laden was still within the Saudi sphere of influence, and he had not yet made the transformation to a transnational jihadist intent on destroying the far enemy. However, it should be noted that the origins of this confusion stems from a series of meetings that took place in Peshawar amongst senior jihadists, including Azzam and bin Laden, which led to bin Laden as the main financier and organiser of the Mujahedeen creating a database of jihadist in Afghanistan (Burke 2004 and Kepel 2006). It is highly probably that this where the myth of Al Qaeda, 'The Base', is born and has subsequently been misconstrued as a global network of terror (Kepel 2006). This is backed up by the Encyclopedia of Jihad from 1992 which makes no mention of Al Qaeda but does mention bin Laden and Azzam (Burke 2004). This becomes highly problematic as Western governments attribute action in Somalia in 1993, an assassination attempt on Egyptian President in 1995, and the June 1996 attack on Khobar to bin Laden, though he has not claimed responsibility either personally or for Al Qaeda for any of these attacks (Kepel 2006). The question becomes if not Al Qaeda who actually carried out these attacks? A more proliferated Islamic militancy problem exists that cannot simply be countered by the destruction of Al Qaeda.

A more compelling case for the existence of Al Qaeda is made for the period from 1996 to 2001 (Burke 2004 and Gerges 2005). We have seen above that Al Qaeda was unlikely to have been a coherent organisation prior to this period. 1996 is seen by many as the starting point of new terrorism and the transnational religious wave (Rapoport 2002). On 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1996 bin Laden

issued the *Declaration of Jihad against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places*, following only a month after the Khobar bombing this propelled bin Laden to prominence as the symbol of Islamic militancy in the eyes of the United States. Though if we look at the context of the fatwa it is much more than that and it highlights the overall goal of trying to achieve an Islamic awakening to reclaim the Arabian peninsula from apostate rulers, and in many ways is a sign of the political realism of bin Laden. He seeks to embrace the Saudi Islamic dissident movement by encompassing the Wahhabite code of civility and references to Ibn Taymiyya, whilst also appealing to the jihadist principles of Azzam and Qutb that it is the responsibility of all good Muslims to come together and liberate the land of Islam from a foreign occupying power (Kepel 2006). In essence it is advocating defensive jihad versus the Near Enemy and attempting to radicalise the Saudi dissident movement into taking up armed struggle (Kepel 2006). Furthermore, if apostate rulers could be replaced with just Islamic governments then there would be no need to engage the Far Enemy directly as its influence and hegemony would already have been nullified (Gerges 2006).

This goes to the very core of the argument about Al Qaeda and bin Laden's death. In these terms Al Qaeda is primarily a socio-political ideology that is concerned with empowering an oppressed people to fight for a better way of life. Of course there are other viewpoints which portray a much more calculated approach. 'Bin Laden and Zawahiri thought in strategic and political terms, veiling their real ambitions in cultural and religious cloth' (Gerges 2011: 77). This starts to hold a lot more sway when you consider that during the period 1996 to 2001 up to forty thousand people trained at bin Laden organised camps in Afghanistan, though by no means did they all join Al Qaeda (Gerges 2006). Though Burke points out bin Laden was more of a facilitator and organiser, as people attending these training camps as late as 1998 had not heard of him (2004). The only reason we are so aware of bin Laden is the actions of the United States in promoting his public image to such a degree that he became the global poster boy for terrorism (Mueller 2006 and Gerges 2011).

In order to begin examining the question more fully we first need to look at what exactly the threat is. On the surface it would appear to be relatively simple to identify the threat but the issue is complicated by lack of clarity in defining the enemy (Croft & Moore 2010). Indeed, it can be said that there has been failure to agree on the nature of the threat and that this has changed over the past decade to suit domestic policy agendas (Croft & Moore 2010). The issue is further clouded as within the broad spectrum of Islamic Militancy there is debate about how they should best engage their efforts in order to secure their political objectives, the choice between the Near and Far Enemy (Gerges 2005). The notion of terrorism as having specific political goals is central to understanding the nature of the threat that it provides as it means that the action itself is rational (Drake 1998).

Terrorism as a rational act opens up a new set of challenges as the objective of an attack can now be seen in the light of influencing how government and individuals respond, instead of just causing casualties and fear (Kydd & Walter 2006). This brings risk analysis and contingency planning into the mix as the response to a terrorist attack may actually benefit the operational strategic goals of the terrorist organisation (Boyd & Scouras 2010). Thus it is argued that the most significant aspect of the threat from terrorism comes from the response of the targeted nation, rather than the act of terrorism itself (Mueller 2006 and Boyd & Scouras 2010). A culture of fear and terror is created by the appearance of randomness and the presentation of terrorists as being madmen in the media (Enders & Sandler 2006). This is reflected in the psychological impact of terrorism, which arguably does more damage than the physical effect (Mueller 2006 and Stewart 2010). Casualties are of course an impact but it is terror and fear that provide the ultimate effect of terrorism. Bin Laden, and the rest of the Islamic militancy movement, are well aware of this and indeed, he highlighted it in his post 9/11 communication 'America is full of fear from its North to South, from its West to East' (2001).

It is important to distinguish between intent and capability, as there is a significant deficit between the two (Mueller 2006). Al Qaeda is intent on causing mass casualty attacks within the US, but it is argued that it lacks the capability for another 9/11. Hence the threat is less severe, though it is a more complex and diverse threat now due to the increase in the ideological influence of Al Qaeda on other groups (Bergen, Hoffman & Tiedemann 2011). This is illustrated by the raw data with only 14 Americans being killed in jihadist attacks since 9/11 (Bergen, Hoffman & Tiedemann 2011), and that there has been no successful attack in the West since 2005 and the 7/7 attacks (Watts 2012). Therefore, Al Qaeda has lost its relevance due to its inability to deliver on its threats and bring the war to the shores of the Far Enemy (Watts 2012). Indeed Hoffman stated that the main challenge 'is to promote and ensure its [Al Qaeda] durability as an ideology and a concept. It can achieve this only by staying in the news, elbowing itself into the limelight through dramatic and bloody attack and thereby promoting its continued relevance as the defender and avenger of Muslims everywhere' (2006: 290).

As Al Qaeda has not delivered a significant attack for eight years now, it can be said that the threat is not actually one of physical damage and actual attack. Though these have been attempted the security services and intelligence agencies have proven themselves capable of preventing the attacks. Indeed Gerges posits that the improvement in the US intelligence gathering is one of the key areas of success during the War on Terror (2011). This is reinforced by operations to target the financing of terrorism and the enhanced multi-national co-operation needed for success (Rubin 2012

and United Nations 2009). Therefore, the real nature of the threat must be from the psychological impact of terror (Stewart 2010). Furthermore, it can be said that one of the main purposes of terrorism is to provoke disproportionate and irrational responses that makes the target nation less secure and impinges on the freedom of its citizens. This is highlighted by Abu Hafs al-Masri, an Al Qaeda military commander, who in the wake of the attack on the USS Cole said, 'We did the Cole and we wanted the United States to react. And if they reacted, they are going to invade Afghanistan and that's what we want' (Gerges 2011: 68)

The United States has been its own worst enemy in helping to perpetrate the agenda of Al Qaeda, via its interventionist foreign policy and its inability to act in a rational manner to threats (Scheuer 2011). Whilst this is a fairly damning indictment it is not unique and is a fairly common charge that the policies of the United States are too open to influence from domestic policy agendas within the terrorism industry (Mueller 2006, Gerges 2011 and Lutz, Lutz & Lustick 2012). Mueller goes on to argue that it is up to governments to educate and persuade the public that mass atrocity events such as 9/11 and 7/7 are extreme instances of terrorism (Mueller 2006). Furthermore, a more resilient populous will lessen the impact of terrorism and enable more rational and considered responses to be played out (Boyd & Scouras 2010).

This is particularly illustrated by the War on Terror which, especially in regards to the invasion of Iraq, has effectively acted as a calling card for Al Qaeda and allowed them to perpetrate the myth that they are the legitimate defenders of the ummah (Gerges 2011). 'In this sense, America's overreaction provides the oxygen that sustains Al Qaeda' (Gerges 2011: 200). Iraq allowed Al Qaeda to reassert its claim of self-defence and thereby, attempt to engage the ummah in a defensive jihad (Brahimi 2010). American strategic planners need to understand that destroying Al Qaeda is not the endgame, and repressive responses reinforce the anti-American hate that global jihad feeds off (McCabe 2010 and Sageman 2004).

It does appear that there has been a distinctive change in US policy since Obama came to power and the transition from large-scale counter-insurgency towards counter-terrorism plus, with the increased use of special-forces and drones (Dormandy 2013 and Stevenson 2011). This is further reinforced by the possibility that post-2014 and the drawdown from Afghanistan that zero US troops on the ground maybe realised (The Economist 2013). Though the 'Silk Road' approach being adopted by Hilary Clinton does run the risk of linking poverty and terror by presenting the traditional US developmental solution to weak states, it should help to make Afghanistan less welcoming to the Taliban in the future due to the promotion of economic growth and stability via infrastructure projects (Dormandy 2013).

Obama has expanded the use of drones to include mid to low level targets in four nations – Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia (Blanche 2011b and Boyle 2013). Whilst this has changed the focus from capturing terrorists to killing them and has proved successful in degrading the central leadership and its capability by bringing terror to the terrorists, it has been controversial for a number of reasons. Despite claims that the switch towards counter-terrorism plus is a step towards reverting to terrorism as being a law enforcement problem, it is asserted that it has actually escalated the War on Terror in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Gerges 2011 and Inkster 2011). The escalation coming not only in terms of casualties, both intended and civilian, on the ground but also from blowback (Boyle 2013). This is especially true of operations within Pakistan's tribal belt, which have led to more and more people turning against the US (Soherwodi & Khattak 2011). Despite however much Obama tried to move the language away from War on Terror the slogan sticks throughout the world. Perhaps the most significant problem though is that whilst drones have had a short-term gain they are long-term strategic losers as their use aids the recruitment of the next generation of terrorists whilst also weakening the sovereignty of Pakistan and Yemen (Soherwodi & Khattak 2011). Furthermore, it reinforces the idea that Muslim regimes are subservient to US will, thus deepening the anti-American sentiment and helping to enhance Al Qaeda's claims that they represent the defence of the ummah from oppression (Boyle 2013).

Following the death of bin Laden, Zawahiri has become the figurehead of Al Qaeda. He was bin Laden's right hand man and served as a conceptualizer and theoretician that helped to shape and deepen bin Laden's ideological and religious education (Gerges 2005). Indeed it could be argued that in many ways he was the power behind the throne, which proponents assert is illustrated by Zawahiri's letter to al-Zarqawi over the indiscriminate killing of Muslims in Iraq (Gerges 2006). Zawahiri highlighted that 'in the absence of popular support the Islamic mujahid movement would be crushed in the shadows' (Brahimi 2010: 94). Despite this Zawahiri faces significant challenges with regards to maintaining the power base that bin Laden had built up (Soherwodi & Khattak 2011). Looking close into the communications from bin Laden then it is clear that he expected the struggle to last decades and set about establishing a movement that could survive war with the US and his death (Scheuer 2011). However, Zawahiri is a divisive figure within Islamic militancy and largely inherited the position by default due to there being no other real candidates, mainly as they are dead (Byman 2011).

In the short term Zawahiri needs to focus on consolidating support, an impossible task whilst on the run and struggling to maintain communications (Soherwodi & Khattak 2011). The US military action had proven effective in denying this capability to bin Laden, as such reducing him to a mainly



symbolic figure (Rollins 2011). Furthermore, it should be realised that terrorism is an expensive business with significant and on-going operational costs. Funding had relied extensively on bin Laden's personal network which allowed Al Qaeda to avoid having to partake in fundraising operations, such as drugs, smuggling and extortion (Watts 2012 and Yusufzai 2011). Zawahiri is going to be concerned with these issues and attempting to secure the future of Al Qaeda Central (AQC) as opposed to engaging on a terror assault on the far enemy. In this light the impact of Zawahiri on Islamic militancy is likely to be restricted to the exposure of Knights Under the Prophets Banner to the wider world (2001).

Outside AQC the threat has proliferated (Hodge 2012). The biggest danger comes from either Al Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) or Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), as they have an independent structure and retain operational capabilities (Soherwodi & Khattak 2011). AQAP has been described by Obama as the most active operational affiliate, though that may now be diminishing following the death of Anwar al-Aklawi (Blanche 2011b and Maginnis 2012). A number of commentators are highlighting the on-going problem in Mali, and the recent hostage crisis in Algeria, as a call to arms that the threat of Al Qaeda is still prevalent (Faiola 2013). A slightly closer examination actually confirms the declining threat of Al Qaeda. Mokhtar Belmokhta, the terrorist leader, was a former AQIM commander who left the organisation following a dispute within the hierarchy (BBC 2013 & Pantucci 2013). This illustrates the fractious nature of Al Qaeda's internal divisions and infighting that have stemmed from the ethnic diversity of the group, especially the perceived favouritism towards Egyptian militants (Blanche 2011a, Gerges 2005 and Sageman 2004). Indeed bin Laden's death may end the mystic surrounding Al Qaeda and enable the US government to differentiate more clearly between Al Qaeda and other Islamic militancy movements (Inkster 2011). Furthermore, the segregation of Al Qaeda into its various autonomous affiliates is detrimental to the Islamic militancy movement as the loss of control from AQC increases the focus on near enemy objectives and as such the blood of Muslims being spilled and the jihad becoming counter-productive (Brahimi 2010).

Burke posits that Osama bin Laden is the best known, and arguably the most charismatic, member of the militant Islamic movement (2004). His death opens up a series of questions and challenges that have been illustrated throughout this paper. As a symbolic figurehead who represents a cultural history of the Islamic militancy movement then he can't be replaced, even by Zawahiri who helped to develop bin Laden's ideology. The issue is less clear with regard to his role in Al Qaeda and the amount of influence he actually maintained on operations. Al Qaeda is a fluid organisation and not a coherent structure that can be dismantled, so in this regard his death would be of minimal impact.

Furthermore, the actual threat posed has been shown to be highly questionable due to the large gap between intent and capability.

The biggest danger to the United States is itself and its over-reaction. Bin Laden and Al Qaeda have failed to unite the ummah in taking up arms, even though the possibility of this occurring in the future exists it needs to be realised that it will not occur without provocation from the US. We have seen that the US involvement in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s transformed bin Laden into a transnational, intent on going after the far enemy. Therefore, the importance of managing the drawdown from Afghanistan and lessening the US footprint in the Middle East will have a more significant impact on the threat posed by Al Qaeda Central than the death of Osama bin Laden.

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